

Reincarnated as the Last of my Kind

4



STORY BY

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ART BY

Yamigo





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♣Me at Age Fifteen

TWO years had passed since I'd inherited the power of the Stella. I'd finally reached my fifteenth birthday—

“Holy Woman! A monster is approaching!” a knight called out from a watchtower set along the fortress walls.

“O-Okay, I'll be right there!”

Over these past two years, I'd come to accept people calling me Holy Woman, as sad as I was to admit it. I placed the sapling I was about to plant down on the ground, instructed a nearby man where to plant it in the field for me, and hurried over to the knight who had called for me. I lacked the stamina to run fast, but I had no choice but to hurry.

“Haa, haa...” I panted as I jogged over.

“Our Holy Woman is still out of shape, I see...” snarked a voice next to me.

“Ah, R-Revi... W-Whoa?!”

Revi grabbed me by my waist. A pair of wings shot out of his back and, carrying me like a package, he flew up. The ground grew distant beneath us.

Noooo! How many times do I have to tell you I'm afraid of heights?! I wanted to shout. But I managed to hold it in.

Instead, I closed my eyes, brought my hands together, and prayed. Over the last two years, my Stella's effective range had grown significantly.

“Oh, Air, the one and only absolute god of this world. Grant us the benevolence of life.”



I couldn't say that I *worshipped* Air per se, mostly because I... well...knew for a fact that this creator god existed. Renge had apparently trained under it, after all. So this was... oddly different from an ordinary prayer to a god. I *wasn't* praying; I was...asking for help.

"Ooh!" the knight in the watchtower raised his voice in awe.

I didn't know where I was flying right now or what kind of monster had appeared. I'd squeezed my eyes shut from fright and couldn't see anything. *But based on his voice, it seems I've successfully purified the thing.*

Now put me down already, Revi!

"All right, next one!" Revi said, unaware of my internal complaints.

"What next one?! There's *more* of them?!" I exclaimed.

"Indeed there is! A whole pack of 'em charging in from the west."

"U-Ugh..."

Renge would never approach purifying monsters like this. I can't even imagine him ever holding me roughly by the waist like a sack of potatoes while flying into danger...

"Still, I think it's safe to say the monsters are thinning down," Revi continued, satisfied. "There's been less than ten monsters a day recently, not counting any packs."

"Y-Yes, I suppose... Ugh... R-Revi, please... You're holding my stomach too tight; I can't breathe! Just put me down already!" I complained.

"You're one fussy Holy Woman, you know that?"

No, this is perfectly normal for a Holy Woman! I...think. And I already told you I'm afraid of heights! Just because you can fly doesn't mean I'm not scared of heights!

"Revi...how many times must I tell you that you need to take care to carry Tina properly?" chided another voice.

"Renge!"

"Renge!"

We both exclaimed as we recognized that voice. I still kept my eyes shut, though.

Yeah, you tell him! With Renge here, this manhandling should come to an end—

Huh?

I felt something fluffy in my hands all of a sudden. Little by little, this fluffiness enveloped my entire body.

“Ah...”

I opened my eyes, only to find myself staring into black, fluffy fur. Next, I found myself looking at the scenery, and the view momentarily wowed me. But I came to my senses soon enough.

“Renge,” I said, recognizing the back I was riding on.

“Sorry, Tina. *There’s a herd of Rucks that transformed into monsters! Thirty of them!*”

“Thirty?!” I parroted, alarmed.

Normal Rucks were large and savage as it was, so *monster* Rucks were terrifying! And thirty of them, at that! And to make things worse, I was sitting high off the ground!

Heeeelp!

“Revi, you keep watch behind us,” Renge instructed him.

“You can count on me, Renge!” Revi chirped obediently.

Dammit, Revi! Why can’t you be this meek around me?!

“Haa! *Huwap!* R-Renge, please! I can’t *stand* being this high! Put me down! Hurry!” I squeaked.

“O-Oh...right.”

Not having my legs on the ground was fine. Circumstances demanded that I stay on Renge’s back, after all.

But! But, but, but!

It only made the terror of sitting so high all the worse! The view was stunning, but as soon as I looked down...!

I know I could just not look down, but I can’t help it!

I buried my face into his back, sinking into the fluffiness so as to distract myself from the terror. I kept clinging to him until Renge told me we were on the ground again.

I mean, high places are scary! I’ve hated them since I was little!

“Tina,” Renge told me soothingly, his voice muffled by his scarf, implying he’d changed out of his beast form.

“Uuu...”

I looked up, only to be faced with his face...so close up. If the scarf wasn’t covering his features, I’d have certainly passed out from embarrassment.

Blessed by ye, fluffy scarf!

“Are you all right? They’re coming.”

“Huh? Eh? Who’s coming?”

Is someone coming over? I thought to myself, confused.

I covered my face—which was much hotter than it should be—with my right hand and averted my gaze. This sense of distance—or lack thereof—between Renge and me was becoming harder and harder to handle. My heart beat fast and my body tensed up and shivered. I'd never felt this emotion in my past life, but this feeling was probably...

"The monsters are coming," Renge reminded me.

"Oh! R-Right!"

The pack of monster Rucks was approaching. Looking around the plains, I could feel the ground quake, signaling their approach.

Oh, that black mass over there...! I noticed something in the distance.

Those were definitely monsters. And they were charging toward us, fast!

"I'll set up a barrier," Renge told me. "I think the Rucks won't notice and just bash into it. So use that chance to purify them!"

"R-Right!"

When we handled packs of monsters that charged headfirst, Renge and Revi would distract and stall them first, buying me time to ask Air for "help."

I could feel the ground rumbling from their stampeding hooves and then a heavy thud when they ran into Renge's barrier. Seeing this almost made me want to laugh—it looked like something out of a cartoon—but...

No! No good; focus!

"Oh, Air, the one and only absolute god of this world. Grant us the benevolence of life," I chanted.

When I opened my eyes, thirty or so Rucks lay dazed on the ground. I exhaled in relief. I'd purified them successfully.

"We should take these back to Deshmel," Renge proposed. "It'd be a waste of good Rucks to leave them here."

"Oh, good idea!"

As the Rucks let out languid cries, Renge used his teleportation magic to transport them over to Fort Deshmel. I had to wonder, with a spot of anxiety, just *where* in the fort they would appear, but it'd probably be fine. The caretakers there would no doubt know how to handle them.

"Sorry, Tina, but could you stay with me a bit longer?" Renge requested.

"Do you sense more monsters nearby?" I asked him.

“Yes. They’re not too close, but not that far, either. Or rather, it stinks of zombies...you know how they smell.”

“Are they close enough to smell them?” I asked, sniffing the air.

“No, I just have a very sensitive nose, is all. And zombies move slowly, after all.”

“R-Right...”

The wind had probably carried their scent over or something. I wasn’t allowed to go too far from Fort Deshmel, so we decided to sit tight where we were for a while. We moved under a nearby tree’s shade and looked over the plains sprawling in front of us.

The highway was totally devoid of traffic. The number of monster appearances had been grinding to a halt over the last couple of years, which was of course a good thing. But they were getting bigger and bigger, and *that* was becoming a problem all its own.

Merchants could only travel if they struck deals with the different countries so they could have knights guarding their caravans in those territories. This meant, of course, that the common citizen couldn’t travel. Even so, merchants that didn’t secure a deal still tried to keep trade afloat by hiring adventurers to guard them.

However, bigger monsters were more powerful and harder to defeat. A normal adventurer didn’t stand a chance.

“What’s wrong?” Renge asked, noticing my pensive eyes.

“I was just thinking that if I do my best here...someday, travelers will visit Rofola again. So I have to keep going!”

“I see. Well...you’re certainly not wrong.”

“Right?!”

If the monsters go away, merchants, adventurers, and normal citizens will be free to travel safely again, goods traffic will resume, and I’ll be able to sell my medicine!

But...

“The Sugula isn’t getting any smaller...” I sighed.

I looked up to the sky, where the Sugula—which had grown far beyond its already large size from two years ago—was visible. By now, it looked larger than the sun and moons. It was steadily swelling, and the speed of its growth was alarming. Recently, I’d begun to feel I could almost see it grow, little by little, in real-time.

It was like a gigantic blot of ink, gradually spreading over the

parchment of the sky.

“Yes, it is,” Renge said, following my gaze. “But it’s not close enough for me to destroy it yet.”

“I-Is it that far away?”

“Yes. Only once it reaches the same size as our world does it start inching toward us. But once it’s *that* big, when my black flames immolate it—”

“.....”

Renge still couldn’t destroy that thing. The Sugula was made up of Camilla and Kathra, the essence of the monsters that infested Wisty Air. *The Sugula is sucking it up from the universe around us, and right now, Wisty Air is just that polluted by it.*

Dad had stopped by Fort Deshmel a while ago and said that magic was becoming unusable, even on the demi-human continent. Incidentally, Dad was currently helping Shinsen travel the world and explain the situation to the different races.

The residents of the demi-human continent had naturally noticed the unnatural black dot in the sky. And so now the human countries, De Marl first among them, were discussing matters with the demi-human countries. Everyone was debating what information to share and trying to decide what to do. And Dad was acting as their intermediary.

It was a very difficult role to play, but as a former knight of De Marl, Dad’s name was well-known among the demi-humans and Mythical Beasts, making him the right person for the job. Plus, Renge had asked him to handle it personally.

Nakona was currently managing the Rofola Lodge along with René and Moné, as well as two new hires; a pair of rabbit kobolds called Sue and Rue. Sue had standing ears while Rue was lop-eared. Also, since relatives of mine and Dad’s were in the inn, it was guarded by two Mythical Beasts, Fugo the centaur and Sisiol the fenrir.

“I’m sure Father would’ve been able to destroy the Sugula even in its current state, though,” Renge appended.

“Your father? He went back to his original world, right?” I asked.

“Yes. Well...I suppose another cerberus, one even *higher* than Father, might’ve been capable of doing it...”

“I always thought cerberi have three heads,” I admitted.

“That’s the Demonic Beast Cerberus. They share the same

name but are different species. You know, like how Revi is a dragon, but he's a different kind of dragon compared to Curalius?"

"So even though they're dragons...and Revi is Curalius's son...they're different kinds of dragons?" I mused.

The Great Curalius was the King of Myths, ruler of the Mythical continent. Curalius was a dragon, specifically an Ivory Dragon, a type of Holy Dragon. Meanwhile, her son, Revireus, was an Inferno Dragon affiliated with the element of fire.

"A dragon's element and attributes are decided at birth, after all. So I think that's why there are so many kinds," Renge explained. "But also, some dragons are born without any attributes and develop them as they grow, depending on their environment."

"Wow..."

That said, I hadn't seen any other dragons except for Revi and Curalius. If there were other dragons around, wouldn't that mean they could become candidates to be the next ruler of the Mythical continent, instead of it being just Revi and Renge?

Curalius *had* said that it wasn't likely anyone stronger than Renge would appear, but he was clearly opposed to taking the role. *In which case...maybe some other dragon will be willing to do it?*

"Speaking of, is Curalius doing well?" I asked.

"Not very. She's quite feeble, given her age..." Renge told me ruefully.

"I see... But who's going to lead the Mythical continent next?"

"I'll let Revi handle it. I'm not fit to be king. I don't have the right qualities for it."

I knew the truth, though. All the Mythical Beasts around Renge, Revi included, viewed him as the next king. But he kept insisting he wasn't fit for the task and that he'd never do it.

I chuckled and Renge stared at me dubiously. But I just couldn't help it.

"I feel the same way. You're not fit to be king, Renge," I said.

"Huh?"

"I mean...being king isn't a normal job. If you just force someone to do it against their will, they'll just make mistakes and fail. But you don't just need to *want* it! You need someone who'll say they can do it. Otherwise, it just won't work."

"....."

Plenty of people want to be king, but not many can shoulder the responsibility or handle the heavy pressure that comes with it.

Renge was strong. Very strong. But this wasn't a role you could force someone into, either. Too many kingdoms had fallen for that very reason.

But I believed Revi could probably manage. So long as Renge was there to put a leash on his exaggerated ego, he could do it.

"Heheh... Hah... Ahahaha..." Renge started shaking with laughter.

"What?" I looked at him, taken aback.

"I think this is the first time someone's told me to my face that I can't do it..."

"Ah... Erm... I just..."

I could hear his muffled laughter through his scarf.

C-C'mon, don't laugh at me! Stop it! Your smile's bad for my heart!

I couldn't look him in the eye when he smiled like that. My heart would beat painfully hard. Everything would get hot and... I just fell into a flurry of bashfulness!

"But I *do* think...that if you set your mind to it and said you'd do it...you'd be absolutely perfect," I stressed.

After all, he *was* trying to remove the Sugula from the sky. If he could direct some of that resolve to rule over the Mythical continent, he'd definitely make a wonderful ruler. Renge was as kind as he was strong, so I was sure he'd make a great king.

All in all, it depended on what he wanted to do.

"Decide I'll do it, eh..." Renge said, a gentle smile on his lips. "That's a good point. I still don't think I'm fit to be king, though. I'm too weak."

"I don't think you're weak so much as you are too kind," I replied. "You care too much about everyone."

"H-Huh?" he looked at me with a strange, puzzled expression.

He didn't act reserved around Shinsen, Eure, or Revi, but the extent he'd go for other people was a bit excessive. Like earlier when he'd helped me when Revi was holding me wrong. And how he'd teleported the Rucks over to Fort Deshmel. Revi would never think of taking them to the fort! Renge went the extra mile, knowing that the people in Deshmel would need meat or otherwise use the Rucks' milk to make dairy products.

...Yeah, I think only he could be that considerate, I thought to myself.

But sometimes, that considerate attitude could feel a bit...

excessive.

"I've had times where I drained myself looking after others too," I said.

"You did?"

"Yeah. I got so burnt out that it made me sick for a while... I'm all better now, though."

"I imagine you got all sorts of strange people to look after at the inn," Renge said with a smile.

"Ah! Yeah..."

I was talking about my past life, though...

I'd simply been too serious. I had tried to solve everything on my own and worked myself too hard. I had tried to pick up other people's share of the work and had taken on more and more labor... Going overboard like that eventually made me collapse and put me in the hospital.

I chuckled to myself wryly. Renge came across as having much the same mentality, so it made me worry about him.

"So...*that's* why I think you're not a good fit to be king," I said, getting us back on topic. "You worry too much."

"Ugh..." he groaned, turning away from me.

He acknowledged he *had* this flaw which, I supposed, was a good thing.

"...You're amazing, you know?" he said. "It's like you know and understand...everything about me."

"Huh? N-No, it's nothing like that..." I stuttered reservedly.

His scarf fluttered and his black hair flowed in the wind. It smelled of trees and foliage. It was somehow nostalgic...and, at the same time, restless. He narrowed his black eyes, gazing at me with gentle softness.

Do I really understand you that much, Renge? I'd be happy if I do, but...

"...E-Erm, Renge...?"

"Yes?"

"I...er... I think..."

No... I don't think! I definitely do! I—

"Ah!" Renge's eyes widened. "Can this wait for later?"

"Yeah!" I replied sharply. Because I could smell it, too.

Shambling, shaking footsteps and a stench acute enough to blot out all the woodland scents. It absolutely spoiled the good vibe we'd had going here...though it was also my fault for forgetting the

zombies were coming!

"Wait, there's a horde of them?!" I asked in horror.

"So it seems! Well... just think of it as if they're bunching up so you can purify them all at once."

"Y-Yes, I suppose that's one way to look at it..."

A horde of zombies appeared a few hundred feet away, dragging their arms as they shambled along. *They're as creepy as ever...*

"A-All right! I'll finish this up real quick and go plant more saplings!" I said with gusto to pump myself up.

"Mm? There's an awful lot of..." Renge said. Then he noticed something. "Tina, you need to wrap this up quick and go help over there!"

"Huh?!"

Renge pointed to the highway, where a merchant caravan guarded by knights was being surrounded by a different set of monsters.

"Got it! I'll make this quick!"



"OH, you certainly saved our hides back there!"

"You really did! I thought we were done for when those monsters surrounded us..."

"That's rude! You would have been *fine*. You had us guarding you... Still, I didn't think you were the Holy Woman the rumors were talking about."

"*Ahaha...*"

We were in Fort Deshmel's dining hall on the first floor with Mister Giyaga, Drek, and the five De Marl knights who guarded their caravan. One of them was Lystein and the rest were members of the Crimson and Azure knights. Everyone except Lys were knights I'd never met before. And besides them...

"Dad! Lico! Didn't you tell Lys about me?" I asked.

"Nope. I thought it'd be more fun if it was a surprise," Lico said, smiling.

"Well, it definitely was," Lys replied. "I've heard rumors about the Holy Woman, but I didn't think she was someone I knew!"

"Th-There are *rumors* about me...?" I murmured. Well...it only

made sense people would hear of me.

Dad, looking all put together in his dress suit and with his hair combed back, scratched his cheek awkwardly. Lico, standing next to him, was also dressed in a ceremonial uniform. But it was a suit, with pants and everything. So it wasn't so much pretty as it was dashing and cool.

The two of them had run into each other in Saikorea and had stopped to rest at Fort Deshmel.

Why just spend one night here? Stay all you want~!

"Oh, yes! Rumors about the Holy Woman who can purify monsters have been sweeping the nations," Mister Giyaga said. "But imagine my surprise when I found out that *that* Holy Woman is little Tinaris!"

"I keep *telling* people to stop calling me that..." I mumbled sheepishly.

"Well, you're doing the same things the Holy Woman Akari-Berz once did. You can't fault the people for making that connection," Lico said, smiling.

As I drooped my shoulders tiredly, Renge entered the dining hall, carrying a cup of water. His entrance made Lico, Lys, and the other knights visibly tense up.

"They said they sent the Rucks into a stable," he told me.

"Rucks?" Dad asked.

"Oh, the stampeding monsters I purified earlier used to be Rucks," I explained.

Rucks moved in thirty-odd member herds, so their stampede was quite horrifying. Watching them run into something and screech as they toppled over was a bit funny, though. Sadly though, some of the Rucks I'd purified back to normal would be slain for meat. It was a sad thought, but...they made for highly nutritious meat, and we needed that to survive!

Please forgive us and let us eat your meat, poor Rucks!

"How are things going in the human countries?" Renge asked dad.

"Everyone's pretty much on board for doing something about Edesa Kura," Dad said. "The demi-human countries see them as a nuisance, too. The elves, dwarves, and kobold kings all agree and have promised their cooperation on the condition we let them meet Tina. I had Shida handle the negotiations with the lizardmen and the ogres."

"Yes, those two races *are* quite persistent and independent," Renge nodded. "If they give you trouble, let me know. I'll send Revi to straighten them out."

"Huh? R-Renge, they won't listen to you?" I asked.

"Lizardmen and ogres are descended from dragons," Renge explained. "It'd make things simpler if Revi went instead."

"Oh, I see..."

I guess that makes sense?

"The human nations *are* pretty stubborn about seeing Tina, though," Dad went on.

"Did you tell them to come over here and see her then?" Renge asked.

"You bet I did," Dad said, gloating somewhat. "Let them know that Tina isn't going to leave the monster-attracting barrier for the time being."

"Not many statesmen have the nerve to do that, though," Lico snickered.

Renge smiled sardonically. Even I, who didn't know the first thing about politics, could tell they were mocking these statesmen!

"I suppose the rest depends on what this era's Elf of the Sun is capable of," Renge continued. "He let the countries know about the Kaguya with a will of its own, right? Has word spread yet?"

"Hard to say," Dad replied. "Thanks to Shida, many of the citizens are starting to accept it, especially in the demi-human continent. But the human countries aren't accepting it as easily."

"I think each nation's religions are getting in the way," Lico shook her head. "It's easier for them to believe their priests over anything Shida says."

"*Hmm...* That's what I thought might happen..." Renge murmured.

They were talking about letting people know about the Kaguya with a will of its own, or as it was otherwise known, the Dwarf inside the Bottle. Knowing about it could help you defend yourself from its powers. It was small, so it expelled copies of itself that invaded people's bodies and took them over from within while also spreading monsters and Camilla.

There was a method to avoid being taken over, though, and it was quite simple. You had to declare clearly—and without letting the Dwarf inside the Bottle fool you into thinking otherwise—that your body belonged to you. Doing this would ensure your soul

would guard your body against being taken over. Since the Dwarf inside the Bottle was so small, that was enough to stop it from taking over.

However...

"Despite all that, none of the priests even believe in their own countries' gods anymore," Dad muttered darkly. "Really, there's no saving them..."

"The foolishness of those who run for safety is what's keeping people like them safe, after all. For better or for worse..." Lico shrugged.

We had known from the beginning that the human continent would be difficult that way. Each country worshipped its own gods, and this got in the way of our method of coping with the Dwarf inside the Bottle.

The various priests tell the people that by worshipping their country's god, they can defend themselves from the Dwarf. And since they have blindly believed in those gods since birth, the citizens readily obey.

But the truth is that those people need to rely not on their countries' gods but defend themselves with their own will. After all, those gods are all fictional, created to make it easier to rule over them. If worse comes to worst, the Kaguya with a will of its own might try to take advantage of this.

But despite it all, the priests only think of securing donations and their own safety and survival. Very inappropriate behavior for leaders who are supposed to be looking out for their flock...

"All that's left is to defeat Edesa Kura..." Dad uttered.

"Let me handle that," Renge said. "But for now, we should let the monster numbers dwindle down some more and ensure all the races can defend themselves from the Dwarf inside the Bottle. Once that thing's cornered, it starts scurrying around in search of a hiding place—and if it enters a human country in its current state..."

"It'd just create a second Edesa Kura," Dad finished grimly.

"Precisely..."

I listened to their exchange silently. Mister Giyaga, sipping tea next to me, looked on with a wan face. Lys and the knights had grave faces as well, but Mister Giyaga was just a merchant. This conversation was *much* darker than he was used to.

"That reminds me... Giyaga, what are you and yours going to do next?" Dad asked, turning to him.

“Well...monsters are attacking merchants all over the land, so we’ve established contracts with a few countries to make sure that we can at least ferry goods. Once we’re done here, we’ll be delivering medicine to Saikorea at De Marl’s request.”

“Like tonics?” I asked.

“No, they’ve got an outbreak of red fever. They need antipyretics and remedies designed to fight the disease as soon as possible. We should get there tomorrow, though.”

“Red fever?” Renge asked curiously.

Since Mythicals didn’t *have* human illnesses, he didn’t know much about them.

“It’s a sort of fever that makes your face swell up and go red,” Master Giyaga explained. “They say the corpses of Mabo serpents cause it, but it’s possible to get infected from the soil, too. There’s a cure for it, thankfully, so it shouldn’t be lethal as long as it’s not an incredibly bad case. The swellings are especially awful, since they linger for over a month even after the fever breaks.”

“*Hmm*, humans certainly do have it rough. I could teleport the medicine over, if you’d like?”

“Wha—?”

Not just Mister Giyaga, but Lys and the knights all stared at Renge with round eyes.

Right, that’s an option!

But come to think of it, *only* Mythicals could use teleportation magic. I’d gotten used to it since Renge and Revi had used it all the time for me over the last two years, but it was pretty advanced magic. They had taught me how to use it as well, but it was too complicated for me to do properly.

The biggest hurdle was the amount of mana needed for it. It was the same amount I’d need to create high-grade tonics for five hours in a row, which was a staggering amount of mana! I could understand why they said humans couldn’t cast it, but the fact Mythicals could use it on a whim was just absurd.

“T-Teleportation?!” Lys stammered in shock. “M-Master Renge, what are you saying?!”

“L-Lys, you’re being disrespectful!” Lico scolded him.

“But Lico, teleportation is—”

“I don’t mind, Miss Licorice,” Renge butted in. “And no need to act reserved on my account. Teleportation is exactly what it sounds like: magic to transport things from one point to another.

It's a kind of magic humans can't use with their meager mana capacity."

Renge cocked his neck, silently asking them if he should use it or not. Instantly, Mister Giyaga got to his feet and bowed.

"Please do, my lord! The faster we take care of this epidemic, the fewer lives that are lost!"

"All right. Happy to do it," Renge nodded. "Where's your cargo, then? Oh, you should probably attach a notecard to it, as well."

"At once!"

You're quick on your feet, Mister Giyaga!

He and Drek hurriedly began preparing the medicine to be teleported. Renge gulped down his water and crossed his arms. It occurred to me that this might be water from the Levinos Spring on the Mythical continent. The Mythical Beasts drank this water, which was rich with the primal mana, Air, for sustenance.

And Renge drinks full cups of that water. I kind of want to try it... Would he let me have some if I ask?

"But distribution issues, eh..." Renge said. "You *did* mention something about that recently, Tina."

"Huh? Y-Yeah..."

In my case, alchemical reagents had been hard to come by. Nakona sometimes brought me some ingredients from around Rofola, but those were only useful for concocting low-grade tonics. That said, my low-grade tonics ended up being ideal quality, so they had the same efficacy as medium-grade ones.

"Well," Renge went on, "the leylines around here have mostly dried up, but most of the areas to the north are still fine. Like around De Marl and Saikorea...and Rofola, come to think of it. Do you want me to set up transfer circles to those areas?"

"Transfer circles?!" Lico cried out, her eyes widening.

Lys reacted the same way. Renge's suggestion made my heart skip a beat.

He can't mean...?!

"I'm sure it might sound like some kind of arcane magic to you," Renge continued, "but it's a magic circle that can transfer people and objects from one spot to another in a second. Since it draws Air from the leylines, it should function permanently once set up, so long as it stays intact, just like a barrier. And since we have a monster repelling barrier around Rofola, we shouldn't waste it."

“W-Wait!” I interjected. “If you do *that*, we could fix the distribution problem all at once! Can you do it?!”

“I don’t mind,” he replied, “but I think it’d be for the best if people of this era did it instead. I’m sure the Elf of the Sun can do it. Why don’t you ask him next time?”

“Aww... That’ll take a while...” Lys sighed, disappointed.

Renge simply retorted that making it easier to travel and move things could be useful for the Dwarf inside the Bottle as well as he looked away.

Ugh... I groaned internally. I get that, but put yourself in my shoes. I’m an alchemist without ingredients to work with!

Lys was disappointed for the same reason.

“We’re ready!” Mister Giyaga called out as he returned.

“Already?!” we all exclaimed.

You have to admire Mister Giyaga and his devotion to his trade...!



THAT night, I was in the bathroom adjacent to the room located in the most secure location on the fort’s second floor. I rinsed my hair, scrubbed my body, and then faced the mirror. I gazed long and hard at my forehead.

A faintly glowing red stone reflected back at me. At this point, touching it didn’t hurt anymore. I tapped on it with my finger a few times, and sure enough, it was still a stone.

I sighed. In the end, I never *did* look into the Stone of Daybreak. I wished I could ask Curalius about it, but I couldn’t leave Fort Deshmel now. Based on what Renge told me that afternoon, King Curalius’s health was failing, though...

Hmm...

“...A stone that can grant any one wish...” I muttered aloud.

A wondrous, magical stone. How was it different from the Spherit Stones that grew on the Spherit Folk’s foreheads naturally? It was all so confusing. Were the Spherit Folk somehow related to the Stone of Daybreak?

Maybe I should ask Dad or Mister Giyaga about it... Or maybe Renge—

...Renge...

I ducked my head under the water and blew bubbles.

I need to sort out how I feel first.

If I didn't, Dad might've started kvetching at me.

Am I...in love with Renge? I wondered.

I'd never experienced anything remotely like this feeling in my past life, so this could very well be considered my first love. During my late teens, the incident with my...past life father happened, so I...might have developed an aversion to men. But since being reborn as Tinaris, I was adopted and raised by a much better father, and many of our customers were men, so I steadily overcame that problem for the most part.

After all...that *abuser* from my past life doesn't represent all men. Though that was, and still is, a hard thing to accept sometimes.

But Renge...had saved my life. He'd saved me from the bandits who wanted to kill me, or worse, when I was a baby and then brought me to Dad. Three years ago, I met Renge again when he came to my aid during Sir Dirbleu's funeral reception. And then he'd saved us from a nasty zombie. Looking back, he'd kept saving me at every turn.

And honestly...he was *very* handsome... Black, silky hair, long on the right side but cut evenly with a braid on his back. Normally, I couldn't really see his hair, though, due to the scarf covering his face. His eyes were as inky black as his hair, and looking at him up close, I could tell he had long double eyelashes and finely shaped brows.

His facial features had—as Mythical Beasts often did—an inhuman handsomeness to them that drew attention from both men and women!

"Phew... Did I get dizzy from the steam...?"

I left the bath, drying my hair all the while. I wiped my body off with a towel and got dressed. I then squeezed my hair with the towel, hoping it would dry faster.

"Oh."

I'd nearly forgotten my circlet. Renge had turned my pendant into a circlet using magic, hiding the Spherit Stone in my forehead. Without this, I'd go through a whole lot of trouble trying to hide the stone.

I mean, what would I wear if not this? A headband? A bandana? A hat that hangs down and covers my forehead? It's not like this world

has sun visors. I'd tried to come up with other ways to hide my Spherit Stone, but nothing was as good as this circlet. Plus, it actually protected my forehead!

I really did owe Renge for this one.

"I really do depend on his help so much," I whispered, but the words sounded awfully loud in the silent room.

Is this...another debt of gratitude I'll need to repay?

Renge would just ask me to make him some chocolate, but with trade having diminished so much, I couldn't get the spices needed to make it.

To begin with, is chocolate really a fair trade when he's saved my life so many times?! Ah...! Don't tell me the reason I can't stop thinking about Renge is because I feel obligated to repay him for everything?!

"....."

Okay, no! Enough running. That might be part of it, but I'm sure I like Renge...as a man...!

"...Yes, that's it."

I nodded once, firmly, and calmed myself. This feeling was love, no doubt about it. He'd saved me so many times, spoken to me, showed me his weaknesses, relied on me, protected me...

Aaaah. So this is what love is like...?

Thinking of him made me restless and fidgety. But it didn't feel bad; it felt...warm and fuzzy. But at the same time, it made me anxious about how he felt about me. *I don't think he hates me, but given our age gap, maybe he sees me as a little sister?*

...No.

My actual mental age didn't accept that. To begin with, what was I supposed to do about my feelings toward him? How was I supposed to handle them? Would I see them to fruition? I'd love to, but at the same time felt embarrassed about it...

But this is first love...and people often say first love never works out.

Ugh! But, but...I still kind of want a boyfriend! Isn't loving him enough, even if it is one-sided...? Wait, no! I sound like Dad! I can't reduce myself to his level!

"Okay, I've decided! I'll confess my feelings!" I announced to the empty room.

And then I'll be able to show up Dad and tell him, "There, I confessed! Your turn!" It's the perfect plan!

Looking back, my priorities might've been a bit skewed.

But it'll be fine. Right? Right! I'll get through it with gusto! No time like the present!

I tied my towel like a headband, psyched myself up, and left the room. At this time of night, Renge would usually be patrolling outside. Monsters appeared without regard for the time of day, so he stood guard by the fortress walls.

As I walked by, I heard laughter from the dining hall. It sounded like a drinking party and there was the smell of alcohol in the air. It was probably Dad and the others. In all likelihood, they needed some time to let off steam while they were in Deshmel. But then again, if they got too drunk, they might embarrass themselves, so I decided to warn him.

"Dad—"

"—Lico, help me out. *S-Shtay* by my side and *shupport* me for as long as I live."

"Huh?"

All the hustle and bustle in the dining room died down at once. Dad was seated at the closest table to the door where I was standing. He had his back turned to me and seated in front of him was Lico. The glass she was holding slipped from her fingers and fell to the table with an audible tinkling.

As alcohol spilled over the table, I could see Dad look up in surprised realization. Lys and Mister Giyaga, who sat at the table diagonal to theirs, had their faces fixed in stunned surprise, and Lico went very red in a way that had nothing to do with the alcohol.

"*Eh, ah*, M-Marcus... What did you just...?"

"*Ah... Er...* No, I just..."

I wasn't sure just what had led to this moment, but Lico was clearly flustered, and Dad was even more out of sorts. Dad got to his feet, said a loud "Ah!" and started scratching his head in distress.

"I-It means...*exactly* what it *shounds* like!" Dad very nearly shouted at her. "You can give me your answer whenever, so just... just think about it, all right?! Good night!"

"....."

With that said, he fled the dining hall in a mad dash. He was going so fast, his eyes squeezed shut, that he probably didn't even notice he passed me by at the entrance.

D-Did Dad just...! In a drunken frenzy...? Well, I guess good on him either way...?!

"Huuuh?! Marcus...felt that way about Lico?! H-Hey, Lico, what're you gonna do?!" Lys rose from his seat and approached Lico.

I secretly watched from the entrance, curious to see how she'd react.

This is so exciting!

"Wh-What am I supposed to do...? I... I don't know, it...it's all so sudden..." Lico stammered.

That made sense. Hearing that would take the wind out of her sails! Dad had just popped the question in a drunken outburst. I ended up watching Lico writhe in embarrassment for a half hour. I completely forgot the reason I'd passed this way—to confess to Renge and have him turn me down!

"....."

Realizing this, I stood stock-still in the middle of the hallway.

Hold on...calm down! You're confessing to him just so he can turn you down...? What's with that?! I questioned myself.

"Forget it. I'm going to bed!" I muttered.

I spun around and went back the way I came. Maybe I really had spent too long in the bath, because I definitely wasn't being reasonable. Realizing my first love must have really confused me, so I figured I'd rest and plan things out better.

I loved Renge. That much was clear. I just needed to figure out how I'd approach it.

I decided I'd put this all on hold and go to bed for tonight. After all, I already had a clear idea of what I wanted.

I wanted to be Renge's girlfriend!

And thinking that way was fine, right? It was first love, after all!

If you were to add my age from my past life, I'd be in my thirties right now, and *that's* when I experienced my first love. Surely, I was allowed to wish for this, right? *B-Besides, as Tinaris, I'm already fifteen years old! That's old enough to fall in love! Old enough to dream of romance! Perfectly normal for this age!*

Yes, it was normal. *Nothing's strange about a fifteen-year-old girl being in love.* I decided to put off confessing, at least for today...but I *would* do it, given the right timing. I certainly wouldn't put it off for

years like Dad did.

And who knows? Maybe Renge will...feel the same way... No, that's expecting too much! Heheh, heheheh...

I was in such a strange mood, my thoughts were going in weird directions. *What am I going to do with myself...? I never knew love could confuse you so much...*

"Tina? You're still awake?"

"Aaaah?!" I almost jumped out of my skin.

As I made to walk away and turned to go back to my room, Renge popped out of the bustling dining hall!

He wasn't there before!

"You were in the dining hall?!" I squeaked.

"I forgot to ask Marcus about his plans for tomorrow, so I came over to ask," he replied. "But they began drinking like a fish, and there wasn't anyone sober enough to talk to. And then I saw you in the corridor."

"O-Oh..."

I immediately guessed it was because of Dad's proposal. It gave those drunks an excuse to drink even more.

Still, drinking that much... Isn't Mister Giyaga's caravan leaving tomorrow? Or do they not have to hurry now that Renge teleported the medicine over? I guess that's good and bad...

"I, um...just came out for some fresh air..." I murmured.

"That right? Then you'll be going to bed now?" Renge asked.

"Y-Yeah."

Renge said he'd return to the walls and cracked a slightly concerned smile. He always wanted to make sure I got enough sleep. And while I snoozed away, Renge and Revi used something called space magic to gather up and trap monsters so I could purify them the next morning. That had been our routine for the last two years.

Isn't it hard on you? Don't you get tired, too?

Whenever I asked them that, they just flippantly said Mythical Beasts don't need sleep. In the end, I just accepted their kindness, but...

"Isn't there anything else I can do?" I asked suddenly.

"Huh?" Renge furrowed his brows.

"I-I just feel bad you have to do this every night..."

"Oh, don't let it bother you. You should rest instead. We'll all be in trouble if you get sick and bedridden."

“Ugh...” I groaned.

He was absolutely right. If I were to fall ill and became unable to purify monsters, things would be awful...

“By the way, what’s that on your head?” he suddenly asked.

“Ah!”

I looked up, seeing Renge approach me with a chuckle. He undid the towel bound around my head, and then I felt hot air blow out of his hand and brush against my face.

“There. All dry,” he said with a smile, having dried my hair with magic.

“Th-Thanks...”

My hair, tinged red at the bottom, fluttered down to my shoulders. I never knew magic could do this, too.

Renge can do stuff like this as well...?

He handed me the towel and I took it in both hands.

Aaah, this isn’t fair...

“Good night, Tina,” he told me.

“Good night...”

I watched Renge leave, his scarf trailing after him.

Am I presumptuous for thinking you might love me back...? I don’t think it’s that strange. I am a fifteen-year-old girl, after all...

“I’ll go to bed...”

I had the distinct feeling I’d be having nice dreams tonight.



“**HMM**, what’s the matter, little Holy Woman?”

“You look quite straaaaange today!”

The next morning, I entered the dining hall, where I found Jiril and Mirage cleaning up the remains of last night’s revelry.

“Ah, Jiril, Mirage, good morning...” I greeted them.

Renge had had both of them come to Fort Deshmel from the Mythical continent to help protect the fortress. Jiril was a dryad and Mirage a lamia. Both of them were pretty and had very revealing outfits. Unlike me, they were very curvy and buxom, meaning they could bare themselves without much shame.

“I just had some weird dreams...” I muttered.

“Ooh, what kind of dreams?” Jiril asked.

“We are quuuuuite proficient in dream divination, yes!”

Mirage nodded. "Shall I interpret your dreeeeeeam?"

"Oh, could you? Well, *hm...*"

I decided to tell them about the scary dream I had as they prepared breakfast.

People often say you should discuss your bad dreams with others, after all!

"W-Well... In my dream, I was flying," I said.

"Oh...!" Mirage said. "What's so baaaad about flying?"

"I'm afraid of heights! It was terrifying!"

"Oh-ho..."

Both of them placed a hand on their cheek, one on her left and the other on her right. Despite being of different races, those two were like twins. As I rubbed my arms, trying to shake off the vestiges of that dream, they smirked at me.

Why are they smirking?! It's scary!

I must've had that dream because of the way Revi carried me yesterday. Why won't he understand I'm bad with heights?!

Geez! I'm having berry jam today and that's that! I thought resolutely, deciding to treat myself to something nice. It's almost time for Nakona to bring fruit from Rofola!

"Well, you see... Dreams where you flyyyyyy meaaaaaan..." Mirage said.

"Y-Yes?"

"Well, they have one of three interpretaaaaations. The first is a desire to reach the top. The second is a desire to escape from something that ties you doooooown. And the third meanssssss sexual frustratioooooon."

"What?!"



Well, that...that's not it! I can think of things that correlate to the first and second interpretations, but...but not that last one!

The first was my ultimate goal: developing the Supreme tonic or cures for all manner of diseases. I wanted to up potion quality, make better medicine, and mass-produce them!

Incidentally, Lico had taken my mana restorative recipe to several alchemists. The results for that should've come in by now!

As for the second interpretation, that was simple enough: my current situation here in this fort. I'd spent two years in Fort Deshmel purifying monsters and hadn't left once all this time. Not that I really left home often when I was in Rofola, but that was very different from here. There was a mountain and a lake. The air was clean. The scenery was pretty and there were hardly any customers.

By contrast, Fort Deshmel was a bit claustrophobic, what with its thick, tall walls. And the air was dry compared to Rofola. And most importantly, all the former slaves who'd been in bondage here were still here. They all lived here with their families, albeit on different floors. The Mythicals were around to help me, but Dad, Nakona, René, Moné, and Mujimuji...weren't.

And it put more stress on me than I imagined. Nakona was nice enough to occasionally deliver fresh fruit to me, and if not for that, I'd have surely gone sick with loneliness by now.

So that dream must mean...

"I must be homesick..." I whispered.

"Oooh! But there's still the third interpretatiiiiiiion!" Mirage cooed.

"No!" I cried instantly.

"How did you fly? Were you soaring up pleasantly, or were you floooooating?"

"Huh? I was so scared I don't really remember... I don't think it was *that* high...? If I had to say, I guess I was floating?"

The two Mythicals kept cackling gleefully and saying, "My, my!"

Wh-What's with them?

"Holy Woman, that's a mark of you closing your distance with the opposite gender!" Jiril said happily. "Why don't you invite a man you fancy to a picnic?"

"H-Huuuuuh?!" I shrieked.

"My, that's a lovely ideaaaaa!" Mirage exclaimed. "We'll teach

you how to handle men!”

“N-No, thank you!” I promptly refused.

They’re looking at me like I’m a new toy or something!

I heated up some prebaked bread, made some bacon and eggs, and carried them to the table with a glass of water and a bit of jam. The place still reeked of alcohol a little, but I tried not to mind.

Today, I was going to spread fertilizer on the saplings I had planted the other day.

“The little Holy Woman *finally* hit puberty!” Jiril cheered happily. “That’s just lovely! Being in love does suit a girl!”

“Yeees, yeeees! Women mature by experiencing love. So who is it? Let us in on your secreeeeeet.”

“I-I’m not in love with anyone!” I denied.

I’m not telling! Not you two!

After all, they’d come to Deshmel because they wanted Renge. So I couldn’t tell them I was in love with him. I’d *never* tell them! After all, how could I compete with them!

“Sorry to interrupt,” Lico said as she entered the dining hall, dressed in a casual outfit. “Good morning, Tinaris.”

“Good morning, Lico!” I greeted her. “You’re up early!”

“Yes, I got the feeling we wouldn’t have time to talk if I didn’t wake up now.” She approached my table and sat next to me before handing me a bundle of papers.

“What’s this?” I asked.

“Over the last two years, I had alchemists from across the countries try your mana restorative recipe. That’s the data they sent,” she explained.

“Oh, thank you!”

Finally! I was thinking it’s about time I got an answer on this!

As its name implied, the mana restorative was a medicine that replenished mana, even for those who weren’t proficient in the mana recovery technique. It was very easy to make: just pour mana into water! It was so simple, I had to wonder how no one had invented it before.

That question was what’d led to this two-year-long inspection period.

“...Nothing again...” I sighed as I skimmed over the notes.

“Yeah. They tried pouring some mana into hot water, but it didn’t produce a mana restorative. They considered there might be some other agent to help bond the mana to the water, so they tried

salt and sugar. But nothing worked. As of now, you're the only one who's successfully made it, Tinaris."

"Oh..."

I put the papers aside. Yes, I was the only one who'd successfully made this recipe. Lico and Elysis had failed to make it. And since the recipe was so basic, we needed to be very careful about who we let know about it.

The reason for that was that if Edesa Kura were to find out about the recipe, it could cause some real issues. We had already seen the lengths they were willing to go to just to collect all the Spherit Stones from my people...

But really, when you think about it, just adding mana to water was too simple a recipe.

"Did you *really* not put in anything but water?" Lico asked.

"Y-Yes."

"Then there must've been some other factor. Do you have any idea what?"

"A-Another factor...?"

I sure do! There's a Spherit-Folk-shaped elephant in the room and it's me!

That must've been why it worked! Maybe I can tell Lico after all? Everything was fine when I told Dad and Nakona, and if Lico marries Dad, she'll technically become my new Mom, so...

"U-Um, actually—"

"Oh, there you are. Good morning, Lico."

I started to speak, but suddenly a voice cut into my words.

"Ah!" I jolted.

"Oh, Lys. Morning," Lico turned to face him.

That was close! If Lys heard me, he'd definitely blab about it!

"Good morning to you, Tinaris," he greeted me. "Good timing, I wanted to tell you both something."

"What is it?" Lico asked.

"Me too?" I pointed at myself.

"Yep," Lys nodded. "I couldn't find the right time for it yesterday."

Right, between Renge mentioning teleportation and Dad's sudden marriage proposal, yesterday was pretty hectic.

"Elysis passed out."

"Wh-What?!"

"Elysis is sick?!" I asked in shock.

Oh, no!

Elysis was De Marl's state alchemist, who'd taught me some important lessons about alchemy.

"Oh, don't worry, she's fine now," Lys said soothingly.

"What happened...?" Lico asked.

"Did she get sick?"

"No, she just pulled an all-nighter."

"An all-nighter?!" Lico and I repeated in unison.

What the heck, Elysis?! At your age?

"One of the senators, Gonzorel, became bedridden, and she stayed up all night brewing medicine for him. The two of them are friends, I think? I've heard they drink tea together often..."

"Oh..." Lico nodded in understanding. "I heard Senator Gonzorel's illness was getting worse. Hasn't he retired yet...?"

"Not yet," Lys said. "He's clinging to the job, saying he can't afford to retire at a time like this. It'd probably be for the best if he did, given his age..."

He's right! If this Gonzorel person is sick, he should rest. And Elysis stayed up all night brewing him medicine... Why won't people in De Marl consider their age?!

"But retirement, huh...?" Lico muttered seriously. "Maybe it's time I start considering what *I'll* do after I retire..."

"Please do," Lys said with a smile that reminded me of the way Jiril and Mirage had smirked at me earlier. "Dad and I will both be relieved if you settle down with Sir Marcus."

"D-Don't bring that up right now, you idiot!" Lico scolded him.

Lico retiring, huh...? And getting married to Dad! That could work!

"We'd love to have you!" I told her.

"N-No, what are you saying?!" Lico stared at me with flustered eyes.

"Ahaha," Lys laughed. "Well, that's the situation right now. You're both close to Elysis, right? So I figured I should tell you."

"Y-Yeah, thanks," Lico said, still a bit out of sorts.

"Thank you, Lys," I nodded.

"Elysis is getting along in years," he said. "When I heard she passed out, some part of me thought that her age had finally caught up with her. Figured I should at least see her one last time, you know? While I still can."

Elysis...

...Renge told me Curalius is in poor health, too.

Meet them one last time, while I still can... He's right. I should meet with them while I still have the chance. I should ask Curalius about the Stone of Daybreak, too. But if I'm leaving the fort, I should ask Revi...actually no, I don't think he has that kind of authority. I should ask Renge, I guess?

"By the way, could you fix me something to eat?" Lys asked with a grin.

"Lys, you lazy little..." Lico growled at him.

"Oh, I'll make you something!" I said.

And for you too, Lico!



ONCE I finished breakfast, I went in search of Renge to discuss the matter of me leaving the fortress. I needed to meet with Curalius and Elysis, pronto! It felt extremely important that I do so sooner rather than later!

But it's looking more and more like only I can make the mana restorative... I sighed as I walked down the corridor looking for Renge. This was probably the Spherit Folk's mana, which could create Spherit Stones, at play.

Oh no, does this mean people are gonna discover I'm a Spherit Folk if they find out about this...? Th-They won't, right? Ugh, now I'm scared...

"Oh, Holy Woman," a group of women that worked at the fort gathered around to greet me.

They all called me Holy Woman as if it was only the natural thing to do. They probably saw the Mythicals call me that and assumed it was my title.

"Ah, good morning," I said.

Ugh, I get the feeling I'm stuck with this title for good...

"Good morning, Holy Woman! Listen to this!"

"Y-Yes? Did something happen?" I asked, a little startled by her excitement.

"Anna from the washhouse is getting married to Dan, who's in charge of the fields!"

"Really?! Wow, congratulations!"

That's great news! We should hold a wedding ceremony! But

wedding ceremonies in this world differ by the country...what with each one having a different religion. And everyone who works here comes from all different countries since they were brought here originally as Edesa Kura slaves. How will they go about a ceremony?

"So...we're all discussing how to hold the wedding ceremony," one of the women said.

"And what did you come up with?" I asked.

"Please!" the women all said at once. "Give the wedding your blessing, Holy Woman!"

"Huh?"

Me?!

"We're all from different countries, so we can't put our ideas together."

"Right, and after we were told each country's gods were just a means to unify the people, we can't believe in them anymore."

"But we know *you're* real, Holy Woman! You're right here!"

"And you make miracles happen every day!"

"If you let them swear eternal love before you and bless their union, I'm *sure* they'll find happiness!"

"Uh, wait, please, hold on for just a second!" I stopped them, perplexed. "I'm just a normal girl who inherited the Stella! So, even if they swear eternal love in front of me, it won't change anything!"

This is way too heavy a role to play! Those miracles are all thanks to the Stella; I just happened to be the sole Spherit Folk survivor who could contain its power! There's nothing special about me! I'm just a normal girl! Swearing eternal love, to me?! I can't carry that kind of burden! I was flustered.

"That's fine! It's more about how the couple feels!" one of the women insisted.

Then let them swear to someone else!

"Th-Then why don't you swear to the one and only god of this world, Air?!" I proposed.

"Aww, come on, Holy Woman! I'm sure you'll give some kind of magical blessing!"

Blessing? How?! I can't do that, as far as I know!

"Please, Holy Woman!" one of the women begged me. "If you officiate their wedding, Dan won't be able to make light of his marriage to Anna, either!"

"That's right!" another one nodded firmly. "He'd be swearing to love her in front of the Holy Woman herself, after all! If he

cheats on her, you could just remind him, 'Have you forgotten the love you swore before me?!' and tell him off!"

"That's right!"

"Huuuh?!" I exclaimed.

Whoa... They don't trust the groom already... Poor guy.

I couldn't just sigh and comply, though. If I agreed to this, I'd end up officiating every wedding around here.

"I-I'm sorry...but I can't make that decision on my own," I apologized.

"Why not?!"

"I mean, I'm not even really a Holy Woman—"

"You're *still* going on about that?!" the women all snapped at me at once.

Huuuuuuuh...?

"You purify monsters every day!" one woman told me.

"That's right! Only a Holy Woman could do that!" another one said.

"B-But like I said..." I stuttered.

"Everyone's saying you're the second coming of Saint Akari-Berz!"

"Which means you're the Holy Woman!"

Argh, they're not listening to meeee!

I was used to being called a Holy Woman, but being actually *treated* like one was completely different!

Me purifying monsters is all thanks to the Stella, and the only thing I can really do by my own power in this fortress is make a whole lot of mana restoratives! That's something I can really do on my own as both a Spherit Folk and an alchemical apothecary!

"But I really *am* a normal girl who just happens to have a body that can withstand the Stella!" I protested. "So won't the...um...the guests at the wedding do as witnesses for the oath?"

"Holy Woman..."

"You don't have to be so modest! It's terrible!"

Oh, come on...

"Well, if you don't want to do it that badly..." one of the women dropped her shoulders.

"Yes, I suppose the guests will do as witnesses..." another nodded.

"So *we'll* be part of the witnesses! Yes, that's the wisdom I'd expect of a Holy Woman," a third said triumphantly. "A brilliant

idea, the likes of which commoners like us could never come up with!"

"Wait, what?!" I squeaked.

Can you stop brown-nosing me like this?! This is a normal idea!

"Um...listen, I need to go tend the fields and spread some fertilizer. If you'd excuse me..." I said softly, hoping to get out of there fast.

"Oh! We're sorry for holding you up," one of the women said apologetically.

"Don't worry about it. I'm willing to help with the preparations for the wedding," I smiled.

"Thank you!" they all said.

"But about where we'll be holding it..." the woman trailed off.

"You can use the dance hall on the top floor," I replied. "I think it's only useful for things like this anyway."

"Thank you!" they all said again.

They bowed to me in thanks, and I waved back at them as I left.

Free at last... That was crazy.

"Good morning, Holy Woman!"

"Good morning!"

As I went out to the fields, everyone working the soil greeted me, to which I bowed my head and greeted them back. Everyone seemed to be satisfied with their jobs.

I should do my best today, too!

To my surprise, I found Mister Giyaga's caravan cheerfully preparing to leave.

They're leaving already? Lys didn't say anything about that to me during breakfast...

"Good morning, Mister Giyaga," I said as I approached him.

"Oh, good morning, Tinaris!"

"Mornin'," Drek bowed his head in my direction.

"You're leaving so soon?" I asked.

"Not many merchants can travel nowadays. We delivered the medicine to Saikorea, but we still need to deliver some items to inns along the way and take some orders while we're at it."

"Oh..."

That's right; Rofola Lodge often orders consumables from Mister Giyaga, too. I realized just how important traveling merchants really were in a world like this. *It's only because of people like Mister Giyaga*

that we can manage the inn comfortably, without having to go out of our way to buy things in far away villages and cities.

“Not that any of the inns are getting any customers nowadays, but the people running the inns still live there,” Giyaga said with a hint of pride. “As a traveling merchant, I can’t very well let my regulars down!”

“You really *are* a merchant through and through!” I praised him.

“Heheheh!” Giyaga giggled boastfully.

“Don’t stroke his ego too much, Tinaris, or he might get carried away,” Drek told me with a feigned smile.

But really, without merchants still coming by, the inns would be in trouble, and they needed guests to stay in them, too. Renge might have teleported their cargo to its destination, but there was no one to stay in those inns with the travel ban. I was sure the owners were looking forward to Mister Giyaga’s caravan staying there for a while.

“But we really *are* lucky that we could stay in Deshmel, eh, chief?” Drek said.

“That we are. This used to be such a dangerous spot,” Mister Giyaga nodded.

“Huh? How come?” I asked.

“Well...this *is* a former Edesa Kura fortress, remember? And one not that long ago, either. We always had to go around this death trap. And since there were no inns in the area, we always had to stock up on food.”

“And that meant our cargo weighed more, meaning we had to get more horses, and passing through here was always scary...” Drek continued. “It’s such a relief that Fort Deshmel fell.”

The two merchants laughed nervously.

Right... Renge called Deshmel the world’s navel, and they had to go around here all the time...

“But right now, we have a monster-attracting barrier set up, so we’ve got a lot of monsters coming in from everywhere,” I informed them.

“Ooh...” both of them uttered, their expressions strained.

“Maybe it’s not *that* different from back when this was an Edesa Kura fort, then...”

In that regard, this was still a dangerous area, and because of that, the different countries sent knights to help secure it. Those

were the knights manning our walls.

Dad had tapped me on the shoulder and told me to just accept their help, since the countries were doing it to save face. And, of course, part of these knights' role was to monitor and investigate me. Many of them were young, attractive men, so some of them probably got some secret orders to win me over or something. At least, that's what Dad seemed to believe.

Well, too bad for you, knights! Renge's a lot cuter than you all are!

Men weren't all about looks, of course. But no human could compare to Renge in terms of handsomeness... And honestly, Gawain and Vector were both more handsome than any of these knights.

I-I'm sorry, knights! Gawain and Vector made me develop a resistance to cute guys, so looks alone aren't enough to win me over!

"W-Well, I was considering maybe we'd stop to rest here on the way back from Fei Lu. But I guess that's not a good idea?" Mister Giyaga asked.

"You were thinking that far ahead? Good thinking, Mister Giyaga! B-But I can't guarantee you'll make it here safely..." I told him.

"What a problem to have..."

You're always welcome here with us, but with monsters constantly coming to Deshmel, it might not be safe here...

"Holy Woman! We've got monsters coming in quick from the north!" a knight called to me with impeccable timing.

"Y-Yes, I'll be right over!"

Oh, come on, already?! I wanted to scatter fertilizer! Why do they always come when I'm farming?!

"I'll get going, then," I said. "Mister Giyaga, you and your group can take your time."

"Tinaris..." Mister Giyaga looked at me, concerned.

"You're going to where the monsters are?" Drek asked me.

"Yes. My power only works within a certain radius and mine isn't that large."

Lady Akari's only reached about thirty feet. After two years, my effective radius was now twenty-eight feet. That meant I could purify monsters inside the walls, but if the monsters got *that* close, it'd scare the people inside.

"Tina!" I heard someone call out to me.

“Renge!”

Whenever we discovered monsters outside the walls, we moved out to purify them, and to do that, Renge and Revi would bring me to the walls. Plus, I hadn’t purified the monsters that came in last night yet. And so, Renge came down from the walls to get me. As I took his hand and prepared to go...

“Be careful out there, Tinaris! Don’t do anything crazy!” Drek told me.

“Okay! I’ll be careful! See you!”

“That’s right, Tinaris!” Mister Giyaga called out. “You’re up against monsters! Don’t be careless!”

“I won’t!” I waved at them and left.

What is this feeling? I feel kind of...uplifted.

“They’re a bit strange...but they’re good people, huh?” Renge said.

“Huh? Yeah, they are...”

Unlike Revi, who took me flying despite my fear of heights, Renge used teleportation magic to move around, so my legs were always on the ground. I still wanted to discuss my venture outside the fortress with him, but it’d have to wait until after I finished purifying the monsters.

“They’re so worried about you... But you’ve got me with you, so you’ll be fine,” he said.

Oh, right...

“Still, it made me happy that they care,” I said.

“I can imagine.”

People hadn’t been worrying about me as much recently. They’d started calling me Holy Woman, and me purifying monsters became my everyday routine. It became such a routine for me that I had almost forgotten how dangerous what I was doing really was.

So knowing someone still worried about me made me happy. People cherished me. They wanted to see me come back safe and sound. It felt like it had been so long since someone last expressed that kind of concern for me...

“Let’s get to it, then!”



“YOU want to go see Curalius?”

“Yeah, I’d like to see her again. Can I?”

“I won’t say you *can’t*, but why so sudden?”

I asked Renge about this as we walked back to Deshmel after we finished purifying the monsters. We stopped to sit beneath a tree to talk without being disturbed by everyone once we went inside. The wind was a little strong, so I had to speak louder than usual.

“I heard that Elysis passed out a while ago, so I got to thinking that I should see both of them while I still can.”

“I see. Curalius is greatly weakened right now... Maybe having you visit her will make her feel better,” Renge said thoughtfully.

“And, um...there’s something I want to ask her too.”

“What is it?”

I hung my head, thinking it over.

This is Renge I’m talking to. I can tell him!

“It’s, um... Do you know what the Stone of Daybreak is?”

“Huh?”

The way he reacted was different from usual. His eyes widened and he furrowed his brows.

...He knows. Renge knows about the stone!

“H-How do you know about that...?” he mumbled.

“Hmmm... When I received the power of the Stella, Lady Akari told me it’s a magical stone that can grant any wish, so it made me curious,” I explained.

“Why do you want to know about that stone? Is there a wish you want granted?” he asked me.

“Well...”

I wasn’t sure how much I could tell him. Would he believe me if I told him that I remembered it from when I was a baby? That was fifteen years ago, but I could remember my first memory quite clearly.

“May the blood of the Stone of Daybreak...never come to awaken.”

Mother had said—prayed, even—that it never awakens. Did that mean that it could put me in danger and I didn’t know it? If so, I’d be better off heeding that warning. Assuming I *could*, of course. But I still wanted to know if there were any risks.

“Well...I thought if I had that stone’s power, maybe I could use it to defeat the Sugula,” I said.

“That stone isn’t something that can help with that,” Renge

denied the idea.

“I-It isn’t?”

I thought really hard about it, too... I figured if it could make any wish come true, I could use it to defeat or wish the Sugula out of existence or something. But if I can’t use it for that, what’s it good for? It didn’t make sense.

“But... I see, Akari told you...” Renge’s frown deepened, and he put a hand on his chin over his scarf.

Right, Lady Akari and Renge...*knew* each other. I didn’t know what the nature of their relationship was, but I could tell Akari was concerned about Renge. *Were they romantically involved? L-Lovers?*

Lady Akari was very pretty, after all...

“This isn’t a pleasant story to hear,” Renge warned me.

“You’ll tell me, though?”

“Well, to begin with... The Stone of Daybreak was first created back when Akari was still alive. The Spherit Folk being born was something of a coincidence, in a manner of speaking. Three thousand years ago, there was a plant that allowed living things like humans, for example, to take Air into their bodies.”

“Take Air into their bodies?!” I asked, my eyes wide.

“That plant doesn’t exist anymore. It’s extinct.”

“Whoa...”

A plant that scary used to exist...?

I supposed the ecosystem of the past must’ve changed, just like the ancient civilizations had. That would mean the ingredients of the past were gone now. I was a bit sad to hear that.

“Well, that plant wiped out an entire village. Akari tried to save the village and concentrated the Air floating around it with the Stella’s power. That merger produced the original Spherit Folk. These new Spherit Folk were essentially like humans, and when Spherit Folk swore their love during weddings, a Stone of Daybreak was produced. It’d appear on a Spherit Folk’s forehead and mature as they experienced love. At first, they thought they were just pretty stones and sent one to Akari in gratitude. After that, Akari used it as a container to pass the Stella down.”

I thought back to the rainbow-colored stone Akari gave me. That was a Stone of Daybreak that contained the Stella?

But wait...wasn’t it supposed to grant wishes?

“After Akari passed on, Stones of Daybreak continued to be produced when Spherit Folks got married. But at some point,

humans realized the power of these stones. A traveler asked the Spherit Folk to share these pretty stones with him and they obliged. The traveler was on his way to visit his parents, who were on their deathbeds. So the traveler prayed upon the Stone of Daybreak: 'Let me be there in time for my parents' deaths.' And that made his parents get better at once."

"Wow..."

"But upon making that wish, the Stone of Daybreak lost its glow. The traveler was astonished and hypothesized the stone must've been behind it, so he went back to the Spherit Folk's village and bought another Stone of Daybreak. And then he wished to become rich and wealthy."

"And the wish came true?" I asked.

"Yes. After that, he never had to worry about money again. And in the end, he made one final wish."

"What wish?"

*If he already had riches, what else could he want for—
Could it be...!*

"Immortality?" I guessed.

"Yes," Renge confirmed right away. "The traveler went to the Spherit Folk village and bought another stone. The Spherit Folk didn't know its value then, so they happily sold it off. They did think the way he always offered much more money was strange, though."

"So the traveler became immortal?" I asked.

"In a sense."

"What do you mean?" I cocked my head.

What sense?

As I looked at him, perplexed, Renge leveled a severe gaze at me.

"The traveler bought the stone and wished upon it. And the moment he did, he became a statue, frozen where he stood. For the first time, the Spherit Folk realized the Stone of Daybreak's power, and forbade them from ever leaving their village. However, the traveler had spoken to those close to him about the stone, and those who believed visited the village. Before long, kings came to hear these rumors and it triggered a long, brutal war."

I clasped my hands over my mouth in shock.

A stone that can grant any wish. The traveler becoming a statue did give him what he wanted. He did become immortal, in a sense. So

that triggered a war?

"I didn't know the Stone of Daybreak was the cause of a warring era..." I said.

"Yes, it was. It started about fifty years after I was born. For about four hundred, maybe five hundred years, humans fought among themselves."

"For centuries...?!" I gasped.

"And unfortunately, the Dwarf inside the Bottle took advantage of that war to create the first Sugula. After Leishi and me burned the world, the humans worked to revitalize civilization on the ravaged wasteland. And using that as their just cause...they attacked the Spherit Folk to steal Stones of Daybreak..."

I was speechless.

"*That* was the havoc the stones brought about..." Renge finished.

"I see..."

I could sort of understand how it happened. The world was burnt to cinders, and people were desperate to return to the lives they had before the cataclysm.

Still, that's...terrible... The Spherit Folk were in the same boat, after all...

"Those experiences made the Spherit Folk gradually cast away their emotions, so they wouldn't produce any more Stones of Daybreak," Renge explained. "Or rather, they couldn't produce them anymore."

"Oh, no..."

The Spherit Folk were said to be a race with deadened emotion, since they were attuned to the world and part of its providence. They were born of the laws of the world, so they had few emotions... That's what a book I read said.

But the real reason was that they cast aside their emotions so they wouldn't produce any more Stones of Daybreak for people to fight over?! That's awful!

"I told you it wasn't a pleasant story," Renge told me empathically.

"You did..."

So the Spherit Folk had that kind of history...

"May the blood of the Stone of Daybreak never come to awaken..."

Mother was right! The Stone of Daybreak shouldn't exist! All it'll

do is spark more conflict.

I'd never create—

“...Wait. Renge?”

“Yes?”

“You said the Spherit Folk of the past produced a lot of Stones of Daybreak, right? Like, when they loved each other... The Spherit Stone on their forehead became a Stone of Daybreak...”

“Yes, that’s what I’ve heard. The Spherit Folk back then were very similar to humans and, once they married, both the husband and the wife had the Spherit Stones in their foreheads become Stones of Daybreak. As proof of their love, they said...”

Oh, that sounds lovely... Wait, no!

“S-So, um... Maybe I...”

I snuck an upward glance at Renge and saw him gazing at me sadly. And really, that gaze told the whole story.



Since the Spherit Folk buried their emotions, they exhibited very little affection, even in marriage. And thanks to that, the Spherit Stones on their foreheads never became Stones of Daybreak.

But me? I had my past memories and had been raised by a human father. I saw myself as human in a way, and my emotions weren't dead at all. I was frank and honest about how I felt.

So if I were to love someone—if I told Renge I loved him—would my Spherit Stone become a Stone of Daybreak, too?

I pondered this silently, feeling my chest clench up.

Will the stone in my forehead become a Stone of Daybreak if I confront and realize my feelings? Will it become this magical stone that can grant wishes and trigger wars? If so, should I admit I love him? Will I have to spend my entire life alone, harboring these buried emotions, never sharing with Renge how I feel about him?

Renge was kind and hated war. He wouldn't want to accept my feelings if it'd create another Stone of Daybreak.

Should I confess to him, knowing that?

But in the end, this'll end up happening whenever I might love someone. The Stone of Daybreak mustn't exist.

No... What do I do...?

"T-Tina... Um..." Renge looked at me carefully.

"I-I'm sorry, I took the conversation entirely off track!" I said, changing the subject.

"What?" Renge looked at me, surprised.

"Remember? I wanted to go see Elysis and Curalius. Can I go? I mean, if we use teleportation, it'd be over in a jiffy. I'll just be gone for an hour to visit them, right? Oh, but I want to ask Elysis a lot of stuff about alchemy... Two hours will probably do just fine!" I rushed out, hoping I had said enough to distract from our other topic.

"...Uh, I think it'll be fine, yes," Renge said with a sad smile. "Take your time and talk to them. I'll have Revi lock the monsters up in a barrier while you're away."

"Oh, right, that was an option! Ahaha..."

He's being considerate of me... Yeah, that's Renge for you...



THE Stone of Daybreak.

When the Spherit Folk swear and commit to loving one another, the Spherit Stone on their forehead changes into this stone that can grant any one wish. Man's pursuit of this almighty power cast mankind into centuries of strife and war.

Even checking whether the people of this age know about the Stone of Daybreak is dangerous. I can't afford to unintentionally tell them about it. But according to Renge, the countries of this era don't know about it...or rather, they forgot about it.

I sighed loudly.

"What's the matter, Holy Woman? Why are you sighing, hmmm?" Jiril asked me.

"Your mood's all chaaaaaanged compared to this morning. Did something baaaad happen?" Mirage piped in as well.

"Oh, Jiril, Mirage... W-Well, I guess it did?"

As I was making dinner, they appeared and began recounting things that had happened around the fort today. They told me all about the upcoming wedding and how Mister Giyaga had decided to wait for tomorrow's vegetable harvest, so he could buy some from us. In other words, he was still in Fort Deshmel for another night.

Tomorrow's when I'll be visiting Elysis and Curalius, though. Now that I think about it, I didn't tell Jiril or Mirage yet...

"Actually, tomorrow I'm going to—"

"Oh, yes, I nearly forgot, hm!" Jiril exclaimed, cutting me off. "This is very important news."

"Huh? What?" I asked.

"Yahoo," a voice called out to me from the entrance to the dining hall. It was...

"Nakona!" I cried.

Nakona stood there, carrying a wooden crate. Right behind her was Sisiol the Fenrir.

Did Fugo stay behind to watch over Rofola?

"Here you go, Tina. Herbs and vegetables from Rofola," Nakona said.

"Oh, thank you!"

Fruit from our orchard! Ingredients you can only find in Rofola! Oh, this is great!

"Oh, right! Do I have news for you, sister!" I exclaimed, clapping my hands together.

"News? What is it?"

"Well, you see, Dad..." I covered my mouth with a hand and whispered into her ear.

The Mythicals had good hearing, so they probably heard me anyway, but I couldn't just loudly discuss family issues in the dining hall.

Besides, we don't know how Lico is going to answer! I mean, Dad just skipped all the steps and proposed!

"Whaaat?!" Nakona cried after I told her.

"Shocking, isn't it?" I smiled mischievously.

"Wow! And he was so *pathetic* about it last time I saw him... Dad finally just went and did it, eh? I hope things go well, though!" Nakona smirked.

"Me too!"

Being around Nakona really cheers me up. That's family for you!

"So, did Dad leave already?" I asked.

"Yeah, I just missed him," Nakona replied.

"Oh, I wish I could've seen him off... How are René and Moné doing?"

"They're doing fine, though they miss you. Especially Moné. Oh, she left you a letter in the crate, so make sure you write back."

"Aww, the sweet little thing!"

She's so cute!

I opened the crate and put the fruit into an iron storage box. I took out the letter I was looking for, finding it plastered to the side of the box. Opening it, I found the words "To Big Sis Tinaris. How are you? I'm doing well!" written in squiggly letters that looked like she was still learning how to write. She wrote all about recent events and how René was doing. Her letter continued onto the backside of the paper.

It sounds like she's getting along with Sue and Rue, too. Aah, just reading this letter heals my heart...

"Stay the night!" I told Nakona after I finished reading the letter.

"Sure, I'd love to!"

"Young miss, you're staying the night?!" a voice suddenly cut into our exchange.

"Whoa?!" we both shrieked.

Lys literally slid into the dining hall!

"What a coincidence! I'm staying here, too!" he declared.

"...Oh," Nakona said, clearly disinterested.

“You could care a little more!”

“I mean, like, yeah, okay?” she shrugged.

“Always so cold... Oh, young miss, you’re allowed to drink now, right? Why don’t we go drinking together?”

“I’ll pass! I’m not here to fool around. Oh, Tina, let’s make dinner together.”

“S-Sure,” I said, shooting Lys a sympathetic look.

“Oh, I wish I could taste your cooking too, young miss...” Lys lamented.

“It’ll cost you a thousand colts,” Nakona said casually.

“You’re charging for it?! I’ll pay, though!”

Does Nakona really not realize how Lys feels about her, or is she just messing with him...?

After that, we asked Jiril, Mirage, and Sisiol to keep Lys company as we went to the kitchen together. Since we had the ingredients, we decided we’d make something with the Rofola vegetables. We started cultivating Dajiz beans here in Deshmel (which are similar to soy beans), and I’d learned how to use them to transmute soy sauce and miso! The only issue was that I couldn’t make much of it... I decided I’d use Compression on the Dajiz beans to make more.

“Holy Woman.”

“Yes?”

While we were boiling water for the pasta, Sisiol peeked into the kitchen. *Is he hungry, too, perhaps?*

“It’s harvest time for Karil fruit on the Mythical continent, so I brought some. I hope they’ll be of use.”

“What the...?”

He showed me a giant fruit that was about as large as my arm...!

Is this cacao fruit?! It’s huge! Oh no! Here come the tributes from the Mythical continent!

These were the second most annoying gift to get, because I didn’t have any idea how to use them. The first most annoying presents to get were money, jewels, and decorations from important people in different countries.

Either way, Sisiol had brought me these gigantic cocoa fruit. And a whole crate at that.

“Th-Thank you...” I uttered.

“Are you happy to have received it?!” Sisiol asked excitedly.

"Ah, yes, but...um, what do you usually do with this fruit?" I eyed it suspiciously.

"You eat it."

"Like...raw? Just like that?"

"Yes!"

"R-Really... Well, with this much, I'm...sure it'll last me a while..." I murmured uncomfortably.

"Yes! Don't hesitate to ask for more!"

He grinned at me, rather uncharacteristically at that, and I could almost see an imaginary tail wag behind him. He was a Fenrir, after all, so he probably really *did* have a tail. Between him, Renge, and Shinsen, it felt like all the canine-like Mythicals were large dogs.

What am I supposed to do with this...?

"What did you get?" Nakona asked me.

"Something called Karil fruit."

"What's it good for?"

"Well, the Mythicals apparently eat it raw..." I said with a frown.

"Whoa..." Nakona said, looking positively grossed out.

The crate was stuffed full of the things. They were crammed inside it, actually...

What am I supposed to do with these things...? Ah!

I sniffed the air.

"Huh, Tina, what are you sniffing?"

"This smell..." I mumbled. "Could it be?!"

"Whoa! Tina?!"

I took one of the fruit and dunked it in the water we boiled for the pasta, then immediately began stirring and applying mana to it! The Karil fruit gradually melted into the water and disappeared as the mix took on its color.



The spicy scent grew even stronger!

I knew it! It really is what I think it is!

All that was left was to taste it. But the concoction didn't light up yet, which signaled its completion. I poured in more mana, stirring vigorously.

"What are you making? Whoa, what's that smell?!" Nakona pinched her nose.

I kept silent as the pot lit up.

It's ready!

"I-Is it done?" Nakona asked cautiously.

"Y-Yeah," I nodded.

"What is it?"

"Give me a minute," I said, getting ready to Appraise the concoction.

"Is this safe to eat...?"

"I think so? I'll need to Appraise it, but if it says it's not toxic, it should be fine."

My Appraisal magic determined the result was one batch of "Karil soup."

K-Karil soup? That's a pretty straightforward name...

I scooped some up with a ladle—the soup was sticky and syrupy. Yep, it definitely *looked* the part!

I brought the ladle to my mouth while Nakona looked on, worried.

Yeah, that's it!

But there was something missing that I just couldn't put my finger on.

"Right!" I exclaimed.

"Whoa?!"

Potetos! Oniuns! Carrots! Ruck milk! I poured them all into the pot and boiled them.

"Huh?! Huuuuh?!" Nakona looked at me, aghast.

"Now for bread!" I said next.

"Whaaat?!"

I took some fermented yeast and kneaded it thoroughly, turning it into bite-sized balls. I put them on a tray and shoved them into the oven!

Next, salad! I took letapods, oniuns, and Dajiz beans and simmered them, and then put some small tometos on them for

decoration!

Next, dressing! I took vinegar I transmuted from citrus fruit, Nipo bird eggs, olive oil, simmered tometos, black pepper, and a bit of lemon juice. It came out as kelp salad-style dressing!

There was still time until the bread was ready, so I got to work on dessert. With fresh fruit, I had plenty of options. I was going to use the orenga and apon for jam, so I figured I'd use bananas too.

Right, I should try making that!

I had a bit of soy milk I made when I'd used the Dajiz beans to make tofu. I failed to make that tofu by the way, but that was fine. *Practice makes perfect*, I told myself. The soy milk came out well for some reason, though...

"Tina, what are you making? Is that Ruck milk?" Nakona asked.

"Nope! Soy milk!" I told her.

"S-Soi...?" she mouthed the unusual word.

"You take this and do this," I explained.

I crushed some bananas and mixed them in weak flour and baking powder, mixed them together, and added the soy milk. I didn't have much, so I had to carefully adjust the amount I had. Once the mixture became mellow, I boiled a cup of hot water and poured it into the pot on medium heat, letting it simmer for ten minutes.

"Wh-What is this?" Nakona asked wearily.

"Steamy hot banana pancakes made from soy milk!" I declared proudly.

It was my first time making them, so honestly, I was a bit worried about how they'd taste. Once they were done, I stabbed a fork into them to check they were ready on the inside, too.

Both the bread and that dish should be ready right about now...

"Dinner's ready!" I announced, dusting off my hands. "Let's eat, Nakona!"

"S-Sure. But what's this brown, mud-like soup? Is it edible?" she asked, sounding very uncertain.

"Heheheh. Don't worry about it!"

The savory flavor of the vegetables should have seeped in, so it'll probably be fine now!

I made servings for Nakona, me, and Lys and carried them to the table.

"Wh-What is this...?" Lys stared at it, his expression screwed

up in disgust.

Even Sisiol, who brought the fruit, and Jiril and Mirage, who knew of these Karil fruit from the Mythical continent, reacted the same way.

“I’ll eat it myself, then!” I declared, making an example of myself.

I opened wide and bit in.

“...Well, that’s a miss,” I concluded after chewing.

Why...?

It looked and smelled like curry, but I could tell from its taste that the quality was off! Something was missing. *There’s this je ne sais quoi that’s missing, like I put in too much water or not enough curry powder. I just can’t reach the richness of flavor or stimulating spiciness I knew from my past life!*

“Oh, I know! Maybe if I use this as a base and add some more spices...” I wondered aloud.

“Oh, this is actually pretty good,” Lys said upon tasting it.

“Oh, yeah, it is. Good going, Tina,” Nakona agreed.

“It’s not ready yet!” I scolded them.

“It’s not...?” They both looked at me, discouraged.

You can’t be satisfied with this kind of curry! We can go higher! I have to keep trying!



AFTER dinner, I went back to my room and jotted down the curry recipe. As I finished, Nakona left the room’s attached bathroom. I closed the recipe book and wiped off the ink pen. I added the recipe to my second original recipe book. When it came to alchemy research, I had over fifty notebooks full of scribbles, but here in my room, I had two separate original recipe books. One for cooking and one for medicine. These were extra special to me.

Nakona stepped into my room wearing a tank top and shorts as she wiped her hair off.

“Aaah, baths with heat stones really are the best~!” she exclaimed.

“Oh, Nakona, you can’t just walk around dressed like that...” I chided. “What if Lys decided to drop in for a surprise visit?”

“Huh? Lys? Why would *he* come over?”

You can be so indifferent in the weirdest of ways.

Honestly, Nakona really *was* cute, even more so after just stepping out of the bath. Her pink hair was even more vivid when wet and her cheeks being pink from the bath made her more alluring than usual. I couldn't help but feel her indifference was a shame.

"So? You asked me to sleep in the same room because you wanted to ask me for something, right?" she asked, prompting me to get to it.

"Y-Yeah..." I tied a thread around the recipe book, put it into a drawer with a lock on it, and moved to the bed, where I sat next to Nakona. "I wanted to ask you something, but... I'm not sure..."

"What do you mean by that?" she asked.

"I just...don't know for sure."

I let myself topple over Nakona, who was lying on the bed. She easily dodged me and mounted me instead. She then sat up, got off me, continued wiping her hair with the towel, and asked, "What, you need love advice or something?"

Way to hit the nail on the head.

"Like, um, this is all hypothetical..." I started.

"Sure. Go ahead."

"If you falling in love would plunge the world into war... Would you still fall in love?"

"That's kind of overblown," Nakona said.

"I-I mean, yeah. It's an extreme example..." I murmured

Not extreme enough to be untrue, though...

"Well... I guess I just never really liked anyone before..." Nakona said awkwardly.

...I feel bad for the three knights who love you...

"But if I *did* fall in love, I guess I wouldn't really care about the rest of the world?"

"Y-You wouldn't?"

"I mean, I don't really know... I've never fallen in love before."

That's not useful advice.

But I couldn't approach Jiril and Mirage about it. They'd just use this as rumor fuel.

Oh, maybe I could talk to Lico!

But on second thought, I figured Lico might be even *less* reliable than Nakona when it came to love advice.

"Wait, so did you fall for Renge or something?" Nakona asked,

barging into my thoughts.

“Pffft?!” I did a spit-take.

What?!

“Ahahaha! Figured,” Nakona grinned, draping the towel over her shoulders.

“Wh-Wh-Wha...?!” I mumbled.

Wh-Why?! Nakona’s as dense as Dad when it comes to romance! I can’t be that transparent!

“How...?” I asked.

“I just kind of knew. I mean, you don’t trust too many people except for Dad and me. And on top of everything else, only Renge knows about your race, right?”

“Y-Yeah.”

He was the one who figured it out first, actually, and had turned my pendant into a circlet to hide my race from other people. That circlet was a cherished treasure and my lifeline, since there was no telling what might happen if people found out what I really am.

“And you don’t usually act selfish around other people, but you don’t mind taking advantage of me and Dad.”

“Huh? I-I do? When?”

“Like with the Karil soup today. The moment I looked at it with disgust, you were like, ‘Don’t worry, it’s edible.’ Would you say that to anyone else, hmm?”

“...W-Was that really such a bad thing...?” I averted my gaze awkwardly.

Maybe having her test-taste experimental food is a little excessive of me...

Nakona was staring at me, perfectly serious.

S-Sorry...

Jiril and Mirage weren’t willing to taste it. It must’ve been the color. That kind of brown was tolerable as a fruit, but in a soup, it just looked wrong. *Maybe that’s just the first obstacle I have to overcome to get this world to accept curry...*

“But I mean, you’ve already caught Renge by the stomach, so I think you’ve got good chances.”

“H-Huuuh?”

“You take things too seriously and overthink too much. Just take it easy. So long as you’re happy and smiling, you’ll be fine no matter what you do. Don’t let the world dictate your happiness.”

“Yeah... Thanks.”

Taking it easy was harder than one might expect, though. Still, I was happy to hear Nakona say that. I was truly thankful.

“But really, don’t you have *any* stories like that to share?” I asked.

“What, love stories? Nope.”

“L-Like...what’s your dream man like?”

“I guess a man who’s like Dad, but less dense when it comes to love and more assertive?”

“Oh, I see... Yeah, that’s... Hm, definitely...” I nodded vaguely.

“What does *that* reaction mean?” She cocked an eyebrow at me.

Why then? Vector, Gawain, and Lys all seem to match that description to a T. What are they missing? Aren’t they assertive enough? Do they need to directly tell her how they feel, up to the face? Because it feels like Lys is kind of like that. If he’s not good enough, I’m not sure what else they can do.

“Ah! Wh-What do you find physically attractive?” I asked, coming up with a possible explanation.

“Huh? Well... Something cool, like Lico’s armor!”

“...Oh. Good for you. I’m going to bed. Good night.”

“Eh? Why are you cutting the conversation off all of a sudden?”

I’m sorry, you three. I can’t help you with my sister.



THE next morning, while I was getting ready to go see Curalius, I packed up the high-grade tonic +5 I’d made way back when I was thirteen. Incidentally, the client Mister Giyaga sold some of this tonic to went unfortunately missing. *With monster activity on the rise, it was very likely they got gobbled up by one of those things... A scary thought.* Either way, I hoped this high-grade tonic +5 saved the lives of some reckless adventurers.

I went out to the field after breakfast and found Mister Giyaga, Nakona, and Lys helping out with the harvest. Mister Giyaga’s caravan did stay an extra day because they wanted to buy off some of our vegetables and spices, after all.

“What do you think of the harvest?” I asked him.

“Hm, not bad,” Mister Giyaga said. “It’s good quality. It’s just ingredients, so I think I’ll buy a bunch of these as is.”

“Oh, thank you very much. We really need more merchants to stop by. But the situation being what it is, things have been rough around here.”

It’d be a waste if all these vegetables and spices went unsold, after all. We already have more vegetables than we can eat inside the fort. The former slaves were very excited to see the large stores of food, though.

“If that’s the case, why don’t you make a stall to sell these vegetables and spices a short distance from here?” Mister Giyaga proposed.

“A stall?” I asked.

“Yes, I suppose that way people could buy vegetables and spices without having to come to Deshmel. But either way, merchants can’t travel too far, what with the state of the world right now,” Lys said, shooting the idea down.

“Aww...” I sighed in disappointment.

“And if you used teleportation magic to deliver the goods, we’d need to figure out how to demand payment, right?” Nakona said, further cornering the idea.

“Right...”

Teleportation magic is very useful, but if we just popped the goods into their destination, how would we collect the payment for them?

If only we could set up a vending machine or something... It might be hard to arrange that with alchemy...but maybe magic can do it?

“Morning, Tina,” Renge said, stepping out of the fort. “Are you ready to go?”

“Oh! Good morning, Renge!” I turned to him with a smile.

Good timing!

“Huh? What’s the matter?” he asked.

I explained the situation to him. Revi came outside a minute after him and listened to my explanation with a dubious expression.

“So, I was wondering if there’s some kind of magic that can sell things automatically!” I finished with that summary.

“I see,” Renge said pensively. “You’d need a composite spell that combines several types of magic for that. That would be very advanced magic, though. I think it’d be difficult with your level of

mastery.”

“Y-Yes, that’s what I thought too. That’s why I asked you about it...” I said.

“T-True... Well, having you depend on me *is* flattering, but the magic Mythicals use is mostly for combat. Offensive and defensive spells. Not much that’s useful for day-to-day life. You should probably consult the Elf of the Sun for that.”

“Shida, huh...?” I said with a hint of dissatisfaction.

Asking him for help was all sorts of wrong and uncomfortable. Mostly in the icky, pervy, creeping sort of wrong...but sure enough, Shida would be the authority when it comes to magic. But Sirius had said most of his magic was combat based, too.

“Did you call for me?!” a voice boomed through the fields.

“Whoaaaaa!” I heard three people shriek behind me.

“What the what?!” I turned around. “Shida?!”

What’s he doing here?!

“Oh, it’s this generation’s Elf of the Sun. Greetings,” Renge said casually.

“Hey,” Shida raised a hand. “I came to check on things. I hope you’re grateful, you inexperienced Holy Woman.”

“Ugh...” I rolled my eyes.

He’s treating me as inexperienced right away! I mean, he’s right... but that doesn’t matter!

I looked toward the gate and spotted Ledo, Sierro, and Kuula not far behind him! They were probably still traveling the human continent. Dad was helping Shida negotiate with the demi-human continent, so I always figured his group had gone home.

“What do you say, Tina?” Renge asked me. “Why don’t you ask him about that...automatic selling magic instead?”

“Ah, no, I’d rather stick to our original plan for today...” I said.

“All right. Then we’ll be going out for a bit. Revi, you look after the place, got it?”

“Understood, Master Renge!” Revi said enthusiastically.

I would’ve liked to talk to Shida about my ideas right there and then, but I felt a greater urgency to see Curalius and Elysis. Revi would be able to keep the monsters contained in a barrier for a few hours, anyway. That’s how they kept the monsters in check when I slept.

“What, you’re heading out now?” Shida asked.

“Oh, yes,” I said. “We’re going to visit the king of the

Mythicals and someone who helped me with alchemy. There's something I want to ask for your help with later, though. It has to do with magic!"

"Oh, that automatic selling thingie? You come up with some strange ideas! Ahahaha! Very well, I'll wait! Or rather, I'll go hit on some pretty girls! Sierro, Ledo, don't try to stop me!"

"Yeah, you go do that."

"I hope they don't turn you down too hard!"

No one's stopping him!

"What do we do, Mister Giyaga?" Lys asked. "Looks like things are going in some interesting directions."

"It sure does! Automatic selling magic... If it's done soon, I'd love to see it!"

"Do you think you'll finish it soon, Tina?" Nakona asked me.

Lys probably only asked because he wanted to spend more time with Nakona, and Mister Giyaga was just following his merchant's spirit.

I looked up at Renge, who simply shrugged.

"That depends on the Elf of the Sun," he said.

"I guess it's hard to say before I ask Shida about it..." I mumbled awkwardly.

And said Elf of the Sun was currently cackling loudly as he headed into the fortress to hit on girls. It felt like we'd need to hurry back and redirect him, or something bad might happen. But being the exemplary merchant he was, Mister Giyaga said he'd handle it and, after leaving his fellows from the caravan to take care of the harvest, took off after Shida.

Yeah, it might be faster that way.

"Well, looks like we'll be staying in Deshmel today, too..." Lys said, stretching casually. "Say, young miss, how long are you planning on staying in Deshmel? Maybe we could sit down for te—"

"Hm, I'm not sure. I'm kind of worried about René and Moné, and I need to take the spices, seasonings, and medicine Tina made for us and get back. I was thinking I'd go home after the harvest's finished..."

"R-Really..." Lys dropped his shoulders in disappointment.

Nakona!

How could she not get it with Lys signaling so hard! Or maybe she *did* get it but just gave him the cold shoulder? *Because if so, that's devilish! Is that the kind of girl she's passing herself off as?*

"Tina, we should get going," Renge told me.

"Oh, right. Bye, Nakona. Give the twins my regards!"

"I will. Good luck out there," she said encouragingly.



RENGE'S teleportation magic made the journey instantaneous. When I opened my eyes, we were at the Levinos Spring. Lotus flowers floated on the water's surface like lily pads. This was the Mythical continent's hallowed ground and the King of Myths' roost.

And sitting at the center of the spring was one large, curled-up dragon, its eyes closed. This was Curalius.

"Curalius? It's me, Tinaris."

"...Oh, Tinaris... Welcome..." Curalius said tiredly.

Her voice was feeble. Her eyes opened to a crack, and I could see they were even more tired than they had looked the last time I saw her, and her scales were turning pale.

Will this tonic still work for her?

"Curalius..." I said as I crossed the lotus flowers and approached her. "Um, this is medicine that I made. I think it might help ease your pain. Please drink it."

"...Thank you...but I don't need it, child."

"Curalius..."

"I've lived more than long enough...and I've done my task of passing down the Stella to its worthy heir. All that's left for me is silent slumber... After all, Revireus, Renge, and you are here... So...I am confident all will be well..."

The high-grade tonic +5 I carried had no place to go now that sellers and buyers were hard to come by. Maybe giving it to her would just be prolonging Curalius's suffering. I looked up at Renge. His eyes were full of sorrow, but I got the feeling he accepted the situation. Her life was simply approaching its end, as was nature's way.

"But I am glad you came to see me... Having someone to speak to does give me strength."

"Really? Then, uh...let me tell you about how things are going!"

"I'd love to hear it. Have you gotten used to your new life in the fort?"

“Yes, pretty much! The first year was a little hard, since the monsters attacked nonstop and broke the fortress walls. But recently, they’ve been coming from afar, so I’ve been purifying them before they make it near the fort. And we’ve been planting crops we can’t raise in Rofola in the fort’s garden, and—”

I sat next to Curalius’s head and told her about all the things that had been happening over the last two years. Thinking back on it, a lot *had* happened since I inherited the Stella and moved into Fort Deshmel.

In the beginning, my purification range still wasn’t all that large, and even staying inside the fort was pretty dangerous. Dad and Renge accepted requests to slay monsters from the assorted countries.

I was pretty scared to see the monsters approach us back then. But despite my fear, the monsters were purified just by coming close to me, which left me both surprised and happy. It felt like I could see, with my own eyes, how life was returning to this world. It was a strange sensation that really drove home just how miraculous the Stella’s power really was.

“I’ll come visit again!” I told Curalius after speaking to her for over an hour.

“Heheheh. Thank you. I’ll be waiting for you.”

I was hoping I could talk to her a little longer, but we still had to visit Elysis. The more I talked to Curalius, the livelier she seemed, so that was satisfying. Talking to her was more effective than the medicine I’d brought...which, being an alchemical apothecary, gave me some mixed feelings.

“Speaking of, that Elysis lady is from De Marl, right?” Renge asked. “I can’t teleport unless I know where we’re going.”

“Well, her workshop was at the end of the corridor past where we had Sir Dirbleu’s funeral reception,” I replied.

“So should I take us there for now?”

“Yes.”

Come to think of it, I’ve only been to De Marl once, right? I wonder if Elysis is in her workshop right now...

“We’re there,” Renge said, jerking me out of my thoughts.

“Aaah?!” I cried out.

“What’s wrong?”

The thought of teleporting into Elysis’s workshop made me realize that we *were* technically illegally entering the country...

"There's no problem with you coming here, Tina," Renge shrugged. "If anything, they've been pestering Marcus about letting you come."

S-Still... And actually, no, that just makes the fact I came here even scarier!

"L-Let's just see her before we get caught!" I said urgently.

"Even if they do...just apologize?"

Would they just let this kind of diplomatic incident slide with an apology? No, let's just get this over with before we get caught!

I peeked inside the workshop, but there wasn't anyone there. The lights were out, and everything was dark.

Is she out? Oh, no... If Elysis isn't here, she must be home. But I don't know where she lives! What do I do? I don't want to ask around, since I didn't come with permission...

"Who's there?" a voice jerked me out of my thoughts.

"Uh-oh!" I exclaimed.

"Oh..."

Did we get caught already?!

"Oh, you're..." the voice said.

A stout, small old man appeared in the workshop.

"Senator Gonzorel?" Renge asked.

"Who?" I turned to look at Renge.

You know him?!

The short old man was dressed fancily and had a large beard. He looked very important.

"This is Lord Gonzorel," Renge explained. "One of De Marl's senators."

"What?!"

The senators were the most important people in De Marl.

Oh, no! I can't believe such a high-ranking man found us right away!

"Ah, erm, hello, my name is Tinaris," I hurriedly introduced myself.

"Tinaris?!" The old man looked at me, quite shocked. "T-The Holy Woman Tinaris?! What are you doing here?!"

"I could ask you the same thing, Senator Gonzorel," Renge said. "This is an alchemical apothecary's workshop."

"You got me there," the old man uttered guiltily.

People in De Marl are calling me "The Holy Woman Tinaris" now?!

I couldn't believe such an important man in a large country like De Marl called me that. *Even if I were to tell everyone to stop calling me that, it'd be pointless now.*

"Tina came here to meet the workshop's owner," Renge explained, "Are they out?"

"Ah, yes, I heard she fell ill, and since I wanted to talk to her anyway, I decided to come visit her," I explained.

Senator Gonzorel's expression visibly stiffened. He looked scary to begin with, so it only made him all the more intimidating! I was used to scary-looking adventurers from the Rofola Lodge, but this man was on a whole different level!

"Is there a problem...?" I asked as he remained grimly silent.

His scary face was contorted with sorrow.

Huh? What? Why is he making that face? Oh no! Stop it! Lys said she'd just pulled an all-nighter...

"Um...is Elysis all right...?" I asked fearfully.

"...It was two nights ago. She suddenly... I'm sorry, but..."

N-No... No, it can't be... It...It just can't...

My hands went limp, and I dropped the bag containing the ingredients I wanted to give her.

But she wasn't that ill...!

"I'm sorry I have to tell you this when you came all the way over to see her..." Senator Gonzorel hung his head.

"...I heard she was just...tired because she pulled an all-nighter..." I muttered.

"No. She was informed her days were numbered three years ago. She must've told that white lie so as to not worry other people. It sounds like something she'd do, the old crone..."

I was speechless. *Three years ago? So by the time she met me, Elysis already knew...?*

"It was very sudden. But maybe she knew it was coming all along."

"...When will the funeral be held...?" I asked softly.

"In a week. Do you plan on coming?"

"Yes."

Senator Gonzorel hung his head again. I did the same.

Just two days ago...and the funeral's in a week. I need to make time for it...

"Still," he said, straightening suddenly, "I will admit I didn't expect to meet you here. This must be the gods' guidance at play."

Tinaris, Elysis told me that should you come to her funeral, I was to give you this.”

“What?”

“I came here to begin closing up the workshop. I was to give you this letter and after that, Elysis said the workshop’s fate was to be decided by you.”

“Huh? What? Wh-What do you mean?”

“You’ll understand when you read it. Personally, I’d be happy if you could take over this workshop... I’ll make you some tea. Take a seat and wait.”

“*Hmm...ah...*”

I couldn’t have an old man do that for me. I wanted to refuse, but the letter tugged at my attention even harder. My heart throbbed hard.

This... This feels strange...

I swallowed the lump in my throat and sat by the window as per Senator Gonzorel’s urging. The table was lined with jars full of snakes and frogs. Renge wordlessly picked up my bag and placed it next to me. I opened the envelope with shaking fingers, pulling out several sheets of paper from inside. I opened the first one, seeing it was written in striking handwriting.

Dear Tinaris,

I hear you’ve been doing well. The rumors about you have been making the rounds. I’m sincerely happy for you. But I was surprised to learn that you became famous not for being an alchemical apothecary, but as a “Holy Woman.” You are still working on your alchemy, yes?

Should you want to devote yourself to being an alchemical apothecary, you can have my workshop after I pass away. Use it as you will.

Actually, I have a son. I haven’t seen him for years now. The last time I saw him, he introduced me to his bride, this gorgeous girl with golden hair. I still can’t believe he got himself such a beauty...

I raised him all on my own. But one day, he up and told me he was becoming an adventurer and leaving De Marl. And then he came back, married to a Spherit Folk princess. Can you believe that?

You kind of remind me of that princess, so I couldn’t help but care about you. So should you wish to keep growing as an alchemical apothecary, you can use my workshop as you will. If you don’t want it, that’s fine.

Live your life as you wish. Like my son did.

*Do take care dear child,
Elysis.*



I stared at the letter in silence.

"Tina..." Renge said, looking at me.

Senator Gonzorel put a teacup on the table in front of me. It smelled just like the tea Elysis used to serve. I folded up the letter and, after hanging my head, wrapped my hands around the cup. My fingers were shaking so much I'd drop it if I tried to hold it with just one hand.

"The workshop is currently considered off-limits to everyone," Senator Gonzorel said. "So you can come whenever you want and use it as you please. Or, if you'd like, you can take all the recipe books and ingredients over to your own workshop. I'm sure she and her husband would've preferred that, too."

"...Did Elysis know...?" I wondered aloud.

"I don't know. She didn't say anything..."

"Should you wish to continue to grow as an alchemical apothecary..."

I looked around the workshop. It was full of tools and recipe books I always wanted to have, research materials, and ingredients I was always jealous of. This place was full of Elysis's life's work. I could almost see Elysis standing in front of her pot.

I bit my lips. I didn't want to cry in front of a person I'd just met. But when I thought of the meaning behind this letter...

"What would happen to this workshop if I said I don't want it?" I asked, my lips quivering.

"Elysis asked me to have everything in here burned," Senator Gonzorel replied.

That sounds like something she'd say.

I'd only met her once, but we had exchanged many letters.

"I'll take it all then!" I declared.

"I see. Will you be using this place?" Senator Gonzorel asked me.

"No, I'll split up everything that's here between Rofola and Deshmel. Renge, could you help me take everything?"

"I don't mind, but..." Renge said.

I gulped down the tea at once and wiped my eyes on my sleeve. I got to my feet and started deciding what I would take where.

Thank you, Elysis.

"Okay! I'll work hard, so people know me not as a Holy

Woman, but as an alchemical apothecary!” I said, trying to amp myself up.

...I'll keep working hard, Grandma! As your granddaughter, I'll keep your legacy alive! Just watch me. I'll become such a skilled alchemical apothecary that people will know me for my medicine even on the demi-human continent!

♣The World Slowly Changes

I was depressed. Dealing with statesmen all the time was wearing on my nerves. By the time I realized just how bad I was feeling, Shinsen, who'd accompanied me on my journey, suggested we return to Fort Deshmel to rest. I think I probably nodded five times to that idea.

The last country we stopped in was Saikorea, and we'd happened to run into Lico in one of the government buildings there. She was dressed in De Marl's ceremonial uniform, as opposed to her usual armor. It was surprising to see her dressed that way, but what made it worse was how the outfit...*really* stressed her lines and curves. I had to look away sharply; it'd take me a while to get used to seeing her like this!

"H-Hey, what brings you here?" I asked.

"There was an alchemist conference," Lico answered. "Once every four years, we all announce the results of our research."

"Oh, right, you did mention that. It looks like it wasn't all that interesting, huh?"

"No, it wasn't," she sighed. "Nothing new to speak of. Tinaris asked me to have her research checked, and the results were no good, either."

"Tina asked you to do that?"

Oh! Must be that mana restorative thing she made by adding mana to water...

If all alchemical apothecaries could make that, adventurers and knights could use magic, which required the use of the mana recovery technique. And it would help mages too, of course. It'd be revolutionary.

But both Lico and De Marl's state alchemist, Elysis, had failed to reproduce it. That was probably because Tinaris was a Spherit Folk: the only race capable of creating Spherit Stones.

"It's strange," Lico said pensively. "Tinaris can create it without fail every time. But no one else can reproduce it. Including me."

“Yeah...” I said evasively. “Well...our water draws on Mount Rofola’s underground spring. So maybe the water quality is a factor, too.”

“Hmm...the water, eh...?” Lico murmured, going completely into alchemist mode. “Mount Rofola *does* have an underground leyline. Maybe the underground water is charged with large amounts of Air that reacts to Tinaris’s mana. I guess I should collect a Rofolan water sample and have Tinaris experiment with other regions’ water, too...”

No matter how many times I see her get serious about alchemy like this...it’s always a little scary. Tina is a lot like her in that regard.

“Oh!” I said abruptly. “If you want to see Tina, why don’t you come with us to Deshmel? We’re heading there right now.”

“Oh, that’s good timing then. I’ll take you up on that,” Lico said right away.

“Are you all right with that, Shinsen?” I asked the Mythical.

“I don’t mind.”

And so, it was decided Lico would go with us—

“I’ll be teleporting us over,” Shinsen said abruptly, “so please hold hands.”

“H-Hold h-hands?!“ I recoiled.

“Huh?! D-D-Do we have to?!“ Lico asked, taken aback.

“Humans fundamentally don’t have enough mana,” Shinsen replied simply. “I have to keep the spell under control if I’m going to take you there safely.”

“Ugh...” We both groaned uncomfortably.

Holding hands at our age is, well, ummm, I mean... You see? And it’s Lico so...y’know? I snuck a glance at her and saw her face was flushed and her lips heavily pursed. It made her look oddly younger. I didn’t know she could make expressions this cute, given her usual taciturn demeanor.

That said, I *had* seen her like this before. When she was drunk, her face got flushed and her eyes watery and wavering. But she was a maudlin drunk who’d keep crying and whining whenever she was inebriated. Honestly, drunk Lico was a handful.

But now, she was sober. Sober but still red as a tomato.

“F-Fine, then... H-Here,” she stuttered, anxiously thrusting her hand at me.

“Ah...! S-Sure...!” I mumbled uncomfortably.

Shinsen stared at us funny, but an unmarried man and woman

holding hands at our age was nerve-wracking. I held hands with Moné and Tina. But they were young girls, and I was their father, so it was completely different. Holding hands with *my* girls definitely didn't count.

I reached out to her timidly, making all kinds of excuses in my head.

We have to! I'm not doing this of my own will, but because Shinsen told us to. Yes, it's just to teleport!

Lico placed her hand over mine.

I-It's soft... Soft and warm. So small and fragile, yet still softer than it looks... Oh no, is my palm sweaty? Does she think my hand feels gross? Men with sweaty palms must be gross. Oh, I can't even look at her!

"Shinsen, let's go!" I begged him.

"Very well. Let's!" Shinsen said.

What felt like a breeze came over us, and the next moment, the ground beneath my feet went from tiled floor to gravel. I opened my eyes, finding myself in a field inside Fort Deshmel.

Former Edesa Kura slaves were all around us. When I'd first seen them after we took the fort, they all looked miserable. But now they looked so satisfied to be tilling the ground for themselves, not as prisoners who were plucked from their homes against their will.

"Th-Thank you..." I heard Lico mumble awkwardly beside me.

"Ah! Oooh!" I cried, dropping her hand.

Shinsen stared at us dubiously again. I felt a pang of sadness letting go of that soft hand, but my relief was even stronger than that. And at the same time, I felt regret. She probably hated having to hold hands with an old man with sweaty palms like me.

N-Not that I want to sweat!

"Ahem," I cleared my throat quickly. "Let's get going."

"R-R-R-Right," Lico nodded.

"I'll go and report to Master Renge," Shinsen said.

"O-Okay. Thanks for the ride," I said.

Shinsen turned around and left us just as the gates opened and a caravan rolled into the fort.

Isn't that Giyaga's caravan? What's he doing here?

"Ah, it's you, Marcus," Renge greeted me as he passed by.

"O-Oh, hello, Renge. What're they doing here?" I asked.

"I found them being attacked by monsters and brought them back with me. I thought we could take a break at the dining hall

and ask how they came to be in the area. Would you like to join us?"

"Sounds good," I said.

I snuck a glance at Lico. The knights accompanying the caravan were apparently in Lysteinn's unit. *Looks like he moved up in the world.*

"What do you say?" I asked her.

"Yeah, I'll come along," she said.



THINGS sure had changed fast in just two years.

Tina had inherited the power of the Stella, and ever since the incident in the Caralus plains, I'd been traveling the land with the Mythicals' representative to brief each country about the Sugula.

The biggest changes came to the largest country—and my homeland—De Marl, as well as the trade country of Fei Lu, and Saikorea, the nation of scholars. The smaller countries all followed in their footsteps and asked for an audience with the Mythicals. This went pretty much as expected, so neither I nor the Mythicals were particularly fazed by that.

The big surprise came from Saikorea. I don't know how, but they found out about Tina and demanded an audience with her. I felt my blood freeze over at that request.

As Tina accepted more and more requests from Saikorea to dispose of the monsters, they became confident in the Stella's existence, and that soon spread to other countries as well. Everyone became aware the Stella had a new bearer sooner than we'd expected, and every country started demanding an audience with her as their condition for cooperation.

But that only made sense—every country was beset by monsters. But the Mythicals never allowed anyone to see Tina, and even *I* could tell what the human nations were thinking. As sad as I was to admit it, they were all thinking of using Tina. Even De Marl. My country: the land calling for peace!

It felt like ever since Dirbleu died, DeMarl had all but forgotten its ideals. I didn't want to admit it, but pretending like it wasn't so would only be a desperate attempt to protect my feelings.

When we had stayed in De Marl years ago, Rondered had

stopped me in the corridor and said, shoulders dropped, “This country has changed. It won’t move for ideals alone.”

I realized, all these years later, that he, too, had ideals he upheld. He tried to defend De Marl’s ideals of peace in his own way. His emaciated, weak expression stuck in my mind for a long time.

When I asked him how his wife was, his eyes widened a bit, and then he furrowed his brows sadly as he said he hadn’t seen her in a while. I could only reply with “I see.”

That woman always was prone to loneliness... I’d thought.

“You should head back home every now and then if you don’t want to end up like me,” I warned him, a little viciously. I thought I was entitled to at least that much after he’d taken my wife from me.

He managed a smile and said, “I’ll head back home today.”

Guess that makes you better than me on that account, huh? I couldn’t help thinking in the moment.

It wasn’t long after that before...

“The Bearer of the Stella has appeared!!!”

The people clamored at Tina’s arrival, calling her the second coming of the Holy Woman. The rumors spread like wildfire.

With this, it was Shida’s turn to act. The Elf of the Sun made a grand announcement for all to hear, to ensure these rumors wouldn’t fuel more power struggles among mankind.

“The Holy Woman,” he decreed, “is guarded by the Mythical Beasts! She resides in Fort Deshmel, at the world’s center, where the monsters will gather, and she will purify them! The peoples of the demi-human continent will obey and follow her!”

Shida had told the elven, dwarven, and koboldian kings about Tina and had their promises to obey and act as such.

With this, the human countries would be wary of fighting over Tina. The Mythicals alone were threat enough, but if the demi-humans were guarding the Holy Woman as well, the human continent would be forced to obey her.

With this, their only recourse was to scheme and find a way to get the Holy Woman to support their cause. In the end, they all decided to dispatch their troops to Fort Deshmel. And since they knew they were up against a Holy *Woman*, they’d made sure to send young, handsome men. Even De Marl did so, much to my annoyance.

Those knights were all relegated to guard duty on the walls.

They could *meet* Tina, but she was typically accompanied by

Renge, Revireus, Jiril, or Mirage. The knights had seen what Renge was capable of on the Caralus plains, so none of them, no matter how handsome, would come anywhere near her. Their countries had likely ordered them to seduce the Holy Woman. But Renge's people certainly knew that, and so did Tina.

Either way, the countries all ended up aiding Shinsen, Shida, and I, at least on the surface—even as they still schemed to get the Holy Woman on their side somehow—and cooperated in discussions about ways to stop the Sugula.

But despite their willingness to help, the real method to stop the Dwarf inside the Bottle was for all countries to stop worshipping their made-up gods. And that was easier said than done.

The demi-humans worshipped the Holy Woman to begin with, so when Shida, their Elf of the Sun, had reported Tina's arrival, they were only too glad to join us. Even the lizardmen and ogres!

This meant the human continent was the only one not protected against the Sugula and the Dwarf inside the Bottle. It was pathetic to see my own species lag so far behind! Though at least, all nations were united in the belief that we needed to stop Edesa Kura. Although some leaders were so enthralled by their technological prowess, they had requested that once Edesa Kura was destroyed, their researchers and alchemists would gain access to their research and people... Yeah, that wasn't going to end well.



“UGH...” I sighed.

“What is it, Marcus? Not in the mood to drink today?” Lico asked me.

“If anything, I'd say you're too eager to drink,” I retorted.

That night, we stayed in Fort Deshmel. I was originally supposed to eat dinner in the dining hall with Lico and Giyaga's caravan and then go to bed in a bedroom on the second floor. But since the knights guarding the caravan were with us, the night turned into a drinking contest.

These young knights were all eager to hear war stories from Lico's and my youth, and Lysteinn got cocky and started telling them all sorts of things. *This kid's tongue has a way of flapping whenever he gets booze in him...*

It wasn't like I had *that* many stories to tell, anyway. Hearing people tell my past all grandly like that felt nice, but honestly? At the time, I was just caught up in living a simple life. So my past didn't feel made up of heroics but rather of reckless attempts to survive. And it embarrassed me.

"By the way...how old are you right now?" I asked.

"Why do you wanna know?" she shot back.

"I was just thinking...you don't seem to age at all."

As Lico sat in front of me, I pondered how she hadn't changed much from when I used to serve in the knights alongside her. She still drank a lot and became a red-faced whiner when she did.

Well, I suppose half her face isn't burnt anymore. And her complaints are turning to an old person's whining, like how she's been getting more tired recently or how fried food's hard on her stomach now or how she's hardly getting chances to shine with the young knights on the rise...

Of course, I was getting old, too. So I could relate to the old stomach not being what it used to be. Tina had recently made a new dish called fried chicken and honestly, I could snack on it for days. But it was a menace. My stomach always tormented me the morning after. Then Tina would have to give me stomach medicine and I'd have to eat vegetable soup for every meal...

I couldn't share *that* kind of lame story with her, of course, so I lied about it. This made Lico slam her glass hard on the table, her face still red.

"Well, I'm thirty-three years old! You gotta problem with that, buddy?!"

"O-Oh... No, never said anything's wrong with that."

Thirty-three, eh...? Thirty-three and divorced... It's about time she starts thinking about the rest of her life, I suppose...

A knight captain retiring usually meant becoming a politician. She'd leave her knight order to her deputy and move on to politics, where she'd manage the country's military. I thought it was about time Lico decided to take that step.

With Dir dead, the only one dealing with the senate and priests is Rondered. And seeing him exhausted half-to-death makes me think he should probably pull out of the frontlines and handle managing the knights instead. Then again, that job always struck me as dull...

"What are you gonna do next?" I asked. "Stay with the knights?"

“Hm? Well, lemme think... I *could* have Jiel serve as captain in my place and go back to being an alchemy researcher.”

So she did think of her future, but not the direction I thought of... An alchemy researcher, eh? It does suit her... Heh, she sure got drunk quickly today. She's slurring her words already.

“Old Elysis is getting along in years, too...” she continued. “So, as a De Marl state alchemist, I think I should focus on my research. I'm *sho* busy, though! I've plenty of research to catch up on. But *firsht*, we need to *finishh* this war with Edesa Kura... I don't want to have to deal with them *jerksh* ever again...”

“Agreed.”

I downed my glass then snatched the bottle from Lico's hands and poured myself a refill.

Seriously, I never want to think about those bastards again.

Lico gulped down her own glass and took the bottle back from me. After pouring another refill, she vigorously slammed it down on the table.

This isn't good... She's getting too drunk. It might be time to take the bottle away. She can get out of control when she's too plastered.

“Mmm... What are you gonna do, though?” she asked me.

“Hm?”

“Are you gonna keep talkin' to *politiciansh* the rest of your life? That sounds terrible, having to deal with them!” She cackled loudly like it was none of her business.

But I *did* understand what she was getting at. *It's really been difficult lately...*

“Yeah, that's right,” I said. “So, if you're gonna quit the knights anyway... Lico, help me out. S-Shtay by my side and shupport me for as long as I live.”

“Huh?”

Mm?

There was a thud, then silence settled over the table. Lico dropped her glass, splashing booze all over. I looked up in a panic and slapped a hand over my mouth.

Huh? Wh-What did I... What did I just...?!

“*Eh, ah, M-Marcus... What did you just...?*”

“*Ah... Er... No, I just...*”

Her glistening, wavering eyes looked at me. But her gaze wasn't tipsy and grouchy like before. *She's completely sobered up! What I just blurted out was impactful enough to knock all the alcohol*

out of her mind.

Why?! Why did I have to say that?! Why now?!

Unable to stand what I just did, I ruffled my hair, got to my feet with a loud shout and said, “I-It means...*exachtly* what it *shounds* like! You can give me your answer whenever, so just...just think about it, all right?! Good night!”



I bellowed that at her, then fled, running as hard as I could.

Did I just blow my chance to walk that back? No. No! It's good I said it! R-Right?!

Before I knew it, I was outside the fort. Shining above the walls were the moons, as well as the eerie sight of the giant black clump blotting out the stars. I was awash in an odd sweat and wiped my chin with my sleeve.

"I should cool my head..." I muttered.

I figured a lap around the fort might calm me down. And someone else patrolling to talk to might be good, too.

"Huh, Marcus? Aren't you supposed to be asleep?" a voice called out as I started jogging.

"O-Oh, Renge..."

A young-looking man popped out of seemingly nowhere. I knew he wasn't a man, though, but a Mythical in human form. I couldn't help but stare at him.

"I just had a little too much to drink, so I was hoping to walk it off..."

"Is that so?"

"O-Oh, actually, this is good," I said. "I wanted to ask you something."

"*Hmm? What is it?*"

I straightened my posture. The Mythical Beast I was looking at could wipe out two hundred thousand mechanized soldiers and mechanical dolls in the blink of an eye. And yet, he was a calm, serene man. I doubted angering him would make him react that way to me, so I asked my somewhat rude question.

"I wanted to ask...about Jiera. Do you know why it was attacked fifteen years ago?"

He looked away from me and paused for a moment before answering. "...Wasn't it...because of the Spherit Stones?"

Aah. He really does know...

"No," I said. "If it was, they'd have taken the Spherit Folk and enslaved them. Slavery is still legal in their country. It always bugged me. Only Spherit Folk can create Spherit Stones! So if they wanted more of those stones, they would've kept the Spherit Folk around to make them. Killing them would just make the stones harder to get in the long run. Then they...no, the Dwarf inside the Bottle must've had another reason. Something else. Something it

wanted badly enough to be willing to kill the Spherit Folk for!"

That's what I wanted to know. There was a chance they might go after Tina because she's a Spherit Folk, and no matter how many Mythicals might be protecting her, the thought of her being pursued without me knowing why weighed on me.

Renge remained silent. He dropped his eyes—hardly visible behind his scarf—and snapped his fingers. At that point, the air around us changed. The wind died down and everything became slightly warmer.

"What did you do?" I asked.

"I set up a soundproof barrier. I can't let anyone hear this."

"You'll tell me?!"

"Yes, you're right," he said. "The Kaguya with a will of its own—it wasn't after the Spherit Stones. It probably wanted the Stone of Daybreak."

"The Stone of...Daybreak? What's that?"

I've never heard of that before. Is it somehow more powerful than the Spherit Stones? It must be, if it's a big enough secret for Renge to set up this kind of barrier just to talk about it.

"It's a mystical stone that can grant any one wish. When Spherit Folk love someone else, the stone in their forehead can evolve into this miraculous object. In ages past, a centuries-long war was fought for the Stone of Daybreak."

"Centuries...long...?!"

Centuries? As in hundreds of years? A war that lasted that long?

Just a ten-year war felt like forever to me, and I'd spent a great deal of time on the battlefield. So the idea of a centuries-long war felt absurd. *How could a war last that long?!*

"When the Spherit Folk first came to be, they lived alongside mankind and were highly expressive and emotional. But after so much bloodshed over the Stone of Daybreak, the species lost much of its emotions. As a result, Stones of Daybreak ceased to be. When Leishi and I burned the Kaguya, civilization was destroyed... And with it, all records of the Stone of Daybreak."

I couldn't believe it.

"The Dwarf inside the Bottle still has his memories from two millennia ago, so he definitely remembers the stones. So he used Edesa Kura and attacked the Spherit Folk to steal the Stones of Daybreak from them... He had hoped that by attacking those dear to them, their neighbors, family, friends, lovers, parents... By

putting them in danger, he could stir their emotions again and turn the Spherit Stones in their foreheads into Stones of Daybreak.”

“That monster...!” I huffed.

Renge closed his eyes. The Spherit Folk were famously known as a race that was hardworking but nearly emotionless. But based on what Renge said, that wasn’t always the case. *What kind of tragedy could’ve driven all the emotion from them?*

And then there’s Edesa Kura...no, the Dwarf inside the Bottle! Despicable!

“So the reason he stole the Spherit Stones from Jiera’s people —”

“I didn’t want to believe it,” Renge said before I finished my hypothesis, “but it’s possible a Stone of Daybreak was born fifteen years ago, and that thing stole it. It’s even said that the Stone of Daybreak might’ve been the cause for the Sugula’s creation in the first place.”

“You’ve got to be kidding me?!”

“And Tina is a Spherit Folk who’s very human in nature,” he went on dolefully. “She’s expressive and emotional, so I think the Spherit Stone in her forehead is extremely likely to become a Stone of Daybreak. Just by existing, the Stone of Daybreak brings war. Hence its name: the stone whose shine heralds the coming of war and brings upon a miracle as crimson as the daybreak sky. So if the stone in Tina’s forehead were to evolve into a Stone of Daybreak...”

“It’ll bring about...crimson bloodshed?” The words slipped out like lead on my tongue.

“Exactly.”

I squeezed my eyes shut. *A miraculous stone that can grant any wish. Of course, powerful people would go after something that can grant wishes. And if they were to find out the Holy Woman and bearer of the Stella might enable them to get that power...*

I massaged my temples. Calling this migraine-inducing didn’t do it justice.

“I don’t think Tina being protected as a Holy Woman is a bad thing at all,” Renge said. “But if anyone found out about her being a Spherit Folk, or the Stone of Daybreak, it’d be a disaster.”

“You can say that again...” I muttered.

Hence this soundproof barrier. We couldn’t let the knights manning the fort hear us, since they were dispatched from different countries to keep an eye on the Holy Woman. If they learned about

it, it'd just add more value to Tina.

"I understand," I said. "So, you think that the Sugula up in the sky—"

"I think it's possible the Dwarf inside the Bottle wished for..."
...Its own body, the Sugula, to be born.

"Dammit...!"

Tina's people went through that kind of hell because of the Stone of Daybreak...and the stone borne of their suffering created that world-eating monster.

How can I ever tell Tina this...?!

"Tina is very bright, though," Renge said. "She'll realize it sooner or later."

"....."

Maybe she will. But if I can help it, I don't want her to know. And please...

"But in fact..." Renge said in a softer tone, "the stone was seen as a symbol of love. When the Spherit Folk married, their stones would evolve at the height of the ritual... So the true root of its name was the Stone of Dawn. The dawn of love."

"...What a terrible story," I sighed.

"I agree," Renge nodded.

It was so terrible I couldn't even laugh. At the same time, it filled me with burning anger. *Does the Dwarf inside the Bottle really think it's allowed to go that far?*

What am I saying? That thing just sees humans and demis as containers to occupy...

"That's why this time, I'll destroy it completely and entirely. So it'll never exist again," Renge declared.

"Can you do that?"

"Yes. And I will. The real problem this time is the Sugula. I thought that Tina purifying the monsters would...maybe not shrink it, but at least stop its growth. But there's no signs of that happening."

"Mm? But you said it'd take twenty years for it to shrink," I pointed out.

"Yes, but remember when it first appeared?"

"About three years ago, right?"

There were reports that monsters were multiplying and getting bigger around the world even before that. Assuming Renge's right and the Sugula formed fifteen years ago...

Oh no! Is he saying the Sugula is going to devour the world in five years?!

“Tell me it’s not true!” I shouted.

“I’m afraid it’s probably exactly what you think. Fifteen years ago it probably—got more than one Stone of Daybreak. It used one of them to wish its body back, birthing the Sugula into the sky. Its influence made the monsters multiply and become bigger and more aggressive, which influenced the Sugula in turn by sending it more Kathra and Camilla.”

“...So if it has more than one Stone of Daybreak, it can make as many wishes as it has stones...!” I concluded.

“That’s what it’d mean, yes. Still, it can’t *possibly* have that many. The Spherit Folk were an emotionally frigid race; they hardly reacted to the deaths of their relatives and loved ones. Besides, that thing is crafty. Rather than create multiple Sugulas in one go, it’d rather hold onto any extra stones to keep reviving itself.”

I clenched my fist and gritted my teeth. The more I heard about the Dwarf inside the Bottle, the more certain I became that it was a creature that had no place in this world.

“But if the Dwarf has a Stone of Daybreak in its back pocket, it could just use it to revive itself again,” I said. “How can you make sure it won’t come back yet again?”

“I have an ace up my sleeve.”

“An ace?”

“I’ve spent the last two millennia trying to think of a way to keep it from being produced again,” Renge answered. “Air said it was an ordeal: a trial we can only overcome if all the races set aside their differences and come together.”

“An ordeal...”

Renge cast his eyes down.

A trial where all living things in this world would have to learn to see past the difference of race and overcome as one.

Right, Revireus did say once that Renge was related by blood to Air or something like that... Is he the only being alive that bridges the gap between Air and this world?

“I alone can’t properly slay that thing,” Renge said softly. “All this world’s races must come to realize that they’re all part of Air.”

“You mean the one and only absolute god of this world?”

“The Spherit Folk were a race that could contain the Spherits, which are an offshoot of Air. That’s why they could produce the

Stone of Daybreak. The only thing to set them apart from Spherit Stones is that they contain a bit more of Air's power..."

"...So the Stones of Daybreak are basically...godly stones?"

"Yes, that seems like an apt way to put it. And then you pray to the stones and Air sees your prayer... I only told you all this because you're Tina's father. You'd never betray her, right...?" Renge questioned me, his eyes gleaming in the dark as they locked on my face, searching for something.

"Huh?" I stared at him dubiously. "Of course I'd ne—"

But before I finished that sentence, the meaning behind his question dawned on me.

"Of *course* I wouldn't," I said, a bit more stiffly. "What do you take me for?"

"I'm sorry..." he said sadly. "But humans have betrayed me in the past."

I fell silent. I couldn't argue back, especially since I'd had people I thought were friends and family abandon me, too.

"I feel you there. But you know...as time goes by and you talk things through, you'll find it's a little easier to forgive and move on," I said, drawing on my own experience.

"Is that how it works for you? Well, in my case, everyone's already dead and buried," he said dryly.

"R-Right..."

Too much time has gone by for him...

"Oh, but the current Elf of the Sun is very similar to Leishi. So I'd love to have a nice, long talk with him..."

"Shida...?" I frowned as I thought of the perverted little elf. "Leishi's the first Elf of the Sun and the ancient king of the elves, right?"

"That's right. He's my one true brother-in-arms, both then and now."

I stared at Renge quietly. Unlike earlier, his cast-down gaze was now serene and calm.

A one, true brother-in-arms, both then and now. Yeah. I had someone like that, too...

"You know...when you tell me those kinds of old stories, it's really clear how amazing you are," I told him.

"Wh-What do you mean?" He cocked his head at me.

"I mean, calling the ancient king of the elves your brother-in-arms..."

“Well, believe it or not, Leishi’s personality was even worse than the current Elf of the Sun’s. So I was the only friend he had.”

I shuddered for a moment.

Worse than Shida? I guess elven kings are just built different...

“Well, it looks like you walked off the alcohol,” Renge said. “It’s getting late. Why don’t you get some sleep?”

“Mm...yeah, I should hit the sack.”

“Oh, right! I almost forgot!” Renge exclaimed. “I passed by the dining hall, hoping to ask about your plans for tomorrow. But you weren’t there!”

I stared at Renge with stunned silence. The dining hall. Me proposing to Lico. I felt a burning chill overtake my face.

Ugh... Tomorrow, huh? How am I going to look Lico in the eye?

“Shinsen tells me the larger countries’ clergy are proving to be an issue, so I wanted to know where you’ll be going starting tomorrow.”

“Y-Yeah, I figured we’d go to Fei Lu and then visit Rofola. René and Moné are still just kids, so I want to give them the attention they need.”

This was somewhat penitence for me. Back when I lived in De Marl, I’d hardly paid any attention to Nakona. I definitely made her feel abandoned. And she still gave me the chance to be her father again. And I didn’t want René and Moné, who’d already lost their parents, to experience the same loneliness Nakona had felt back then.

The moment I’d taken those two in, I saw them as my kids. And I had every intention of showering them with the affection they needed. I’d never use my job as an excuse to neglect them. I won’t live through that kind of regret again.

“I see. Fei Lu is a fairly large country, after all,” Renge said.

“It might take us a while, but we need to teach them how to defend themselves from the Dwarf,” I said.

“Yes, I’d imagine... It’ll take a while...”

Renge looked up, his eyes fixed on the ever-growing Sugula.

Yeah...looking up puts the pressure on, doesn’t it?



“YOU leaving already, Marcus?”

The next morning, Lico called out to me from behind while I was eating breakfast in the second-floor dining hall.

"HUEGH?!" I choked on my food upon hearing her beautiful voice.

Shinsen rubbed my back as I washed my food down with some water and took a breath.

"S-Sorry," Lico said awkwardly.

"I-It's fine."

O-O-O-O-Oh, no! How am I supposed to look at her? I-I can't turn around...!

"You leaving today?" she asked again, after my coughing fit subsided.

"Y-Y-Y-Yeah."

Shinsen looked at me like I was a chicken running around with its head cut off. It was hard to see his eyes behind his bangs, but he was clearly puzzled by my erratic behavior.

Stop that! Don't look at me like that! Read the room, dammit! It's really bad when a Mythical thinks you're being weird!

"I think I'll say goodbye to Tina, then leave," I said.

"I talked to her earlier, and I think she's out front."

"O-Oh, did you now? She's up early."

Last night, I stayed up too late...or rather, couldn't fall asleep for a long while, so I woke up late. But since Tina was outside, I figured I'd finish eating and go outside to see her.

"And, ummm...about yesterday..." Lico started.

"Pfft!" I spat out my food. Man, I shouldn't have taken another bite, but my hands needed something to do!

"What's wrong, Sir Marcus?!" Shinsen looked at me, alarmed. "You're being odd today; have you fallen ill?!"

Sorry, Shinsen!

He hurried over to the kitchen to get me some napkins.

I can't turn around! There's this pressure behind me! From Lico's direction!

"Can I have some time to...think it over?" she asked softly. "There's, uh...a lot I need to sort out before I make that kind of decision."

"Nng..." I winced.

"I'll consider it as an option for what to do after I retire. Is that...all right with you?"

"...Y-Yeah."

With that, I heard her footsteps gradually recede. In the end, I didn't look at her once.

An...option for...her retirement, eh? But she'll be thinking it over, huh?

"All right!" I said victoriously as I got to my feet. "Let's get going, Shinsen!"

"Huh?!" Shinsen stared at me, alarmed at my sudden burst of energy.

All right, I'm all fired up! Let's do this! Time to work my ass off today!

♣ A Son and Daughter's Family Matters – Nakona's Perspective

THIRTY minutes after my adorable sister, Tina, left with Renge to visit Curalius and Elysis, the gates of Fort Deshmel swung open again, and four adventurers walked in.

"Hi there, Aaron! Sirius! Gina! Mina!" I greeted them with a wave of my hand.

"Oh! It's Nakona!" Gina said as she noticed me.

"You're here too?" Sirius asked.

"Yeah, I stopped by yesterday to deliver vegetables and fruit from Rofola," I said.

This was a group of adventurers that frequented our inn. They waved back and approached me. Mina, who was close to my age, asked me what I was up to as she looked down curiously at the vegetable patch.

I was currently helping Giyaga harvest the vegetables. It was pretty interesting, since the vegetables they grew at the fort differed from those we grew back home. Tina had a knack for cooking these vegetables into tasty dishes. She always impressed me with the odd yet yummy concoctions she whipped up—often on a whim. I wasn't really good at cooking, except for what Dad had taught me, and I didn't like experimenting with new things.

"A vegetable harvest session!" I told Mina. "What about you guys?"

"Oooh, yeah! Listeen to this!" Mina said, half-crying. "You won't believe what Marcus diiiid!"

"Mm? What about Dad?"

Apparently, their group had been captured by Edesa Kura when they snuck into Fort Deshmel two years ago, and Revireus had saved them. Well...not deliberately. He'd just happened to defeat the fortress' garrison while the four of them were in custody.

This led to them running into Dad again and he had promptly put them to work for him. He had them doing everything from luring monsters to Deshmel from afar to investigating the different

countries' internal affairs.

He's paying them, so I guess it counts as work?

Some countries were more cautious around Dad due to his connection with De Marl, but they were less tight-lipped around adventurers. That's why Aaron's party was hired.

"He's a slave driver, that's what!" Mina whined.

"What are you saying?" Gina snapped at her. "You're the one who said we wouldn't do anything if it wasn't worth the money, so he's paying us to work!"

"Yeah, and thanks to that, our reputation as adventurers is going up," Aaron appended.

"Well, yeah...but we barely get any vacation time... And getting chased around by monsters is scary!" Mina protested.

"Oh, come now, we get by just fine with Sirius using his magic to hide us," Gina said.

"That's right. Keep complaining, and we'll leave you out of the next job!" Aaron chided her.

"Aww..." Mina pouted.

"Well, if it's too much for you, I could ask Dad to cut down your workload," I suggested.

Mina frowned and simply mumbled a grumpy "It's fine...was just complainin' a little, that's all."

I could understand their difficulties, though. They had to travel between different countries, which was only getting harder with the monsters rampaging about. Sirius was a half-elf and used something called concealment magic to keep them hidden. But without that, they'd be in real trouble.

"Still, it's becoming difficult to use magic," Sirius said. "I can't help but agree with Mina's complaints."

"Oh? Really?" I asked.

"Yes, the pollution is quite strong. Even around Deshmel, near the Holy Woman... The Air's pollution is deeper than you humans realize..."

Sirius looked up at the sky—at the black shadow blotting out the sunlight—the Sugula. It used to be as small as a bean. But in three years, it'd grown massive. By now, it was larger than the sun.

But even though it's already that large, it's still growing, right? It's so creepy...

"Even with this thing in sight," Sirius went on, "you humans are calm. Too calm. Meanwhile, the demi-human continent's rulers

are running around taking appropriate countermeasures.”

“Appropriate countermeasures? Like what?” I asked.

“Praying to the Holy Woman, of course,” he answered. “Luring the monsters over to Deshmel. Seeking out and exterminating extensions of the Dwarf inside the Bottle. Preparing for an invasion by Edesa Kura. Other than that, there’s nothing to be done.”

“Oh! Because each country worships its own gods, you mean,” I said. “I believed in the gods of De Marl until just a couple of years ago.”

I was born and raised in De Marl, after all. And both my mother and father had believed. But after seeing Dad and Tina work so hard, I decided that if these gods were getting in the way of their work, they weren’t worthy of my faith!

The Mythicals often said that the gods were just falsifications created to solidify human regimes. So I was going to choose my sister, who was giving her life and time for the world’s sake, over fake gods!

But of course, people like Vector, who came from a family of clergymen, couldn’t accept that so easily. I noticed that pain in his letters. Reading how he felt *really* made it clear how big of a problem it was. But that was an issue they’d have to sort out themselves. There wasn’t anything I could do about it.

“Well, we didn’t believe in any gods to begin with,” Gina said.

“People *have* to believe in the gods of the country they live in, after all,” Aaron nodded.

“Right! I don’t understand why they’re so devoted to deities who don’t help them one bit!” Mina said. “I mean, unlike invisible gods, you can at least trust cold, hard money!”

Everyone fell silent at Mina’s miserly comment. Gina’s shoulders slumped and Aaron cracked a wry smile.

She’s not...technically wrong...?

If nothing else, Mina found a way to stay stable and calm in these trying times.

Actually, looking at Mina gave me an idea.

“Oh, I know,” I said, raising a finger. “If you want money, how about handling a job for me?”

Mina gave me a fed-up look, much to my surprise. I figured a money-grubber like her would be all for it.

“C’monnnnn, girl! I *just* said Marcus works us to the bone and you want us to slave some more?” she complained.

Oh...so you want to just kick back, have fun, and get money for it. I see. Guess I'll have to throw in a little extra, then.

"Should you be saying that?" I said smugly. "All I wanted was for you guys to help me with the vegetable harvest. And I'll even throw in a meal and some sweets! Based on Tina's recipes! Do you understand how much that's worth?"

"We'll do it!" Mina said at once.

"You're such a pushover, Mina..." Gina mumbled, exasperated.

"And the others will help, too!" Mina appended, getting her sister and comrades involved in it, too.

"Fine, I'll help," Gina said, cradling her head. "I mean, how could I say no when Nakona's offering a home-cooked meal?"

Aaron, meanwhile, seemed to be on board due to the promise of sweets. Based on how he thrust out his fist enthusiastically, it was clear he had something of a sweet tooth. Gina didn't seem all that on board with the plan, but I couldn't imagine her not helping the two of them out.

I was just pleased to get more hands on deck.

"All right, I'm counting on you, then," I said. "Oh, and Sirius? I want to ask you to handle something else."

"Some other matter?" Sirius asked. "Whatever can I help you with?"

The more vegetables Giyaga bought from us, the better. We had way more than we could eat. So we couldn't very well *not* take advantage of the increased manpower we had here, could we?

But I needed Sirius's help with developing that automatic selling magic Tina was talking about. I figured an elf like Shida and a magic expert like Sirius could lend us their wisdom.

I explained the situation to a quizzical Sirius, and he furrowed his brows.

"You don't want to help us?" I asked.

"No... It's just...Shida's here?"

"Hm? Well, yes."

Come to think of it, his companions, the dwarf and kobold, went off somewhere.

Well, they're probably somewhere in Deshmel.

Giyaga had Shida occupied with developing that magic... Or rather, I *hoped* Shida had a good idea about how to do it.

Upon hearing that Shida was around, Sirius narrowed his eyes. His usual, flighty attitude made way for what looked like

nervousness. I didn't know Sirius was capable of making that expression.

"I've heard Shida is your son," I said.

"Yes, well... I *am* a half-elf, though."

"I know."

I know that, but what about it? They're still father and son, right?

"Well, his mother is a high elf and princess of Forestria. In marrying me, she lost the right of succession and Shida was never put in line for the throne. And besides, I often travel about, and I'm rarely in Forestria..."

"So, what you're saying is, it's awkward for you to be around him?" I asked.

"Well, put bluntly, I suppose that's right."

So he basically wants to run away from seeing his son. I don't know what elven families are like, but isn't Shida over fifty years old? He looks like a kid but is totally a pervy old man on the inside! So I have a feeling Sirius's concerns are unfounded.

"Well, I can't force you to do it..."

"My apologies!"

Oh, wow! He actually ran! Why is he so awkward?

I got the feeling Dad was in a far more awkward family position than Sirius, though, what with his wife cheating on him with his coworker's husband while he was out fighting a war! If that wasn't bad enough, Mom remarried the man she cheated on him with and took me with her for a period of time. And now, all these years later, Dad's realized he has one-sided feelings for the coworker who also got cheated on!

Did he even get anywhere with that? I might have to give him a good talking to if he hasn't made a move yet!

I got the feeling Dad and Licorice's relationship needed something to stimulate it. In Dad's case, it'd probably be booze. But we only had ordinary liquor in our kitchens.

I decided to think of some plan to hook Dad up with Licorice later. For the time being, I showed Aaron's group over to the fields so they could help us with the vegetable harvest.

We loaded the vegetables into wooden crates and carried them to Giyaga's caravan. As I was making places for the crates on the carriage, I spotted another knee-high crate and pulled it off the cart.

"Huh? Say, Drek! Do you know what this crate is for?" I called out to one of Giyaga's guards. "I saw it in the back of the cart!"

“Hmm? Don’t quite remember. Looks like a crate of potions to me.”

I put the dusty crate down and placed my hands on my hips. *Even if his job is mainly to keep an eye on the caravan, a merchant’s guard ought to know what they’re carrying!*

“Wanna open her up and check what it is?” I asked.

“Aye, we can’t have whatever’s inside rot... Let’s see.” Drek moved to open it up.

Upon seeing its contents, I let out a surprised “Oh.” The box was full of hay for cushioning purposes, and lying in it were five small bottles of the recovery +5 high-grade tonic Tina had made way back when! *They even have the mark Tina draws on her bottles...*

“Whoa?! There’s this many left over?! Why?” I asked, surprised to see they hadn’t sold the valuable tonics yet.

“Oh, I remember now...” Drek said. “No one wanted to buy medicine that’s never been tried before, so it ended up collecting dust...”

Tina made these two years ago! Tina’s potions are so popular, people come from far and wide to buy them from Rofola. I can’t believe anything would be left unsold...

“I guess I’ll take it off your hands, then...” I said.

This is the fruit of Tina’s labor. So, if no one wants to buy it, I’ll find a use for it back home. But as I said that, I heard a high-pitched ringing coming from the lookout tower. This was Fort Deshmel’s alarm, which we heard quite often.

Is it more monsters?

I assumed Revireus would stall the monsters until Tina came back and used the Stella. I was so used to that arrangement, I wasn’t at all scared. So I closed the box’s lid, feeling absolutely safe.

However—

“It’s the enemy! Enemy attack! An Edesa Kura army is marching on us!” the knight on the lookout called out.

“Huh?!” I looked up in surprise. That was the last thing I expected to hear.

All of the people working the fields immediately looked scared.

“Edesa Kura automatons and mechanized soldiers approaching! With monsters in tow!” the lookout bellowed. “All noncombatants, take cover inside the fortress! Prepare for combat! Prepare for combat! An enemy attack! Attack from Edesa Kura!”

“Wh-Why...?” Drek whispered next to me.

That was a question likely everyone was asking themselves. But to begin with, Fort Deshmel was originally an Edesa Kura fortification. It only stood to reason they’d try to reclaim it.

We were using it as a base to purify the monsters right now, but we weren’t considered a country or attached to any country. We lacked a military’s defensive capabilities, and as unreasonable a land as Edesa Kura might be, they wouldn’t need to declare war on an entity that wasn’t a nation. To them, we were just an armed group that stole their fortress.

Still, launching an attack on civilians without any prior notice? That’s the kind of insanity I’d expect from Edesa Kura.

That’s why I hate them!

“...Lys!” I called out to him. “You’re guarding Giyaga’s caravan, right?! Take your men and get the merchants inside!”

“Huh?!” Lys exclaimed, confused. “R-Right!”

“Aaron, you guys round up the workers and evacuate them indoors!” I told the adventurers.

“A-All right!” Aaron said.

We needed to make sure the noncombatants were safe first. It was the same as Rofola. I could fight and defend myself, but not everyone could. As a knight’s daughter, I had to make sure everyone was led to safety and prepared to fight back. I needed to know how many soldiers we had, and if we didn’t have enough, I’d need to gather everyone and decide how to hold the fort until Tina got back.

The workers hurriedly ran into the castle, carrying their work tools with them. As the knights and Aaron’s group ran around getting everyone inside, I approached the walls, hoping to get a grasp on the situation. But there, I ran into a large shadow. It had a head of red hair, a pair of crimson, slitted eyes, and a row of jagged teeth.

“Ah! Revireus!” I called out.

“You’re...” he said, recognizing me.

Revireus stood there in his human form, a pair of large wings on his back. Many Mythicals occupied Deshmel to guard the Holy Woman and he was one of them: the red dragon Revireus. He said he was weaker than Renge, but since he was a dragon, he was stronger than any number of humans.

Good timing! He’s useful at times like these.

"You're the Holy Woman's sister," he said. "I thought you'd gone home by now."

"Hey, what's going on out there?!" I demanded, skipping over any pleasantries. "Edesa Kura are attacking us?!"

"So it seems," Revireus said off-handedly. "But the Holy Woman and Master Renge are away, so I guess I'll just toss a barrier over them for now..."

"Oh, but there aaaare some mechanized soldiers..." another voice butted into our exchange.

"Still, they're no match for us, hm!" a third voice joined in.

"Jiril! Mirage!" I recognized the women.

Jiril the dryad and Mirage the lamia levitated next to Revireus. They were in charge of defending Deshmel. With them and Revireus on the case, they wouldn't even need my help.

"Mm?" Revireus looked up suddenly.

"My, my," Jiril said. "It seems there's another enemy force advancing on us from the other direction."

We could hear shouted reports of another force advancing on the gate on the opposite side of the fortress. It seemed Edesa Kura didn't attack without a plan this time. We got monsters every day, but this was the first major attack from Edesa Kura's army that I knew of.

Will the Mythicals be all right on their own?

The automatons and mechanized troops simply moved according to Edesa Kura's instructions, and many of that country's people were probably taken over by the Dwarf inside the Bottle...

Can we really just overpower them with a few Mythicals?

"Let's split up," Jiril said. "Sisiol should be here too, so we'll have him and Master Revireus trap the Edesa Kura army in a barrier."

"Yes, that sounds like a fiiiiine idea," Mirage nodded.

"Is there anything I can do to help?!" I asked.

"My... I daresay I don't think a human can do much to help us here," Jiril said.

"That's riiiiight," Mirage nodded. "Well, I suppose we can count on you to keep things quiet in the castle. We'll set up a barrier to ensure no harm comes to the castle—"

"A monster's flying in!" two knights screamed as they fled the ramparts.

"Huh?!" we all exclaimed in shock.

Revireus's group looked up. A black mass flew through the sky, gouging something outside the barrier.

"It can't be..." Revireus breathed out.

"Get in the castle!" Jiril shouted at me.

I saw the black mass burst near the ramparts—from inside the walls, of all places!—and turn into a cloud of black mist, like a bag of black pepper had just exploded. The mist quickly spread.

The Mythicals pulled me back at once, hurtling me into the castle's interior.

Tell me this is a lie. The knights on the walls, did they...?!

"Graaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!"

"Ghaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa..."

They turned into monsters. My hunch was right on the money...!

I can't believe this! Those bastards realized we'd try to hold the fort and sent monsters to charge the walls so we could kill them and then scatter Kathra inside our defenses!

True, no matter how many soldiers they brought, they'd be no match for the Mythicals. But no living creature can block the effects of the Kathra! Those Edesa Kura bastards really are the worst. Not a shred of knightly honor to them! They'd stoop to any low if it suits their ends!

I breathed out a shaky sigh as I got indoors.

"Ah, thank goodness! Nakona, you're all right!" Giyaga exclaimed with relief.

"What's going on outside?!" Lys asked at once. "I think there were still people working out there! Should we go get them?! And if we're up against Edesa Kura's army, us knights of De Marl can fight them off, too!"

"Can we lend you a hand, too?!" Aaron asked.

"We can help you fight, if you need us!" Gina offered.

Lys was a knight of De Marl, so we would have asked him for help either way. But it didn't change the fact they had gotten us by surprise.

Revireus, Jiril, and Mirage were all pale. I was shocked by the sight of the knights being transformed into monsters and clenched my fists hard. I knew Edesa Kura's people might abuse monsters for war, but...who would think they'd go this far?!?

Lys and De Marl's knights were here as Giyaga's guards, so they had prioritized helping the caravan members evacuate—they were all safely inside. Aaron's group had escorted a bunch of the

workers inside when it happened, so they were safe too.

As I looked around fearfully, I found to my relief that everyone I knew personally was safe. But still...

"They...they're using monsters..." I told them.

"They're what?" Aaron asked, confused.

"No...!" Lys whispered.

Aaron wasn't there for the Battle of the Caralus Plains, but Lys and De Marl's knights had been. And they realized how bad it was when they heard my whisper. The knights exchanged grave looks.

"...For now, let's confirm the situation and who can fight." Lys turned to his men. "Igил, how many of our squad's members are in the castle? And check which adventurers here have fighting experience. We can count on all the Mythicals to fight too, right?"

"*Hmph!* You're one cheeky human," Revireus said haughtily. "Of course you can. If Master Renge finds out about this blunder, he's bound to scold me."

"Come now, Master Revireus," Jiril said. "Shouldn't we stop being stubborn and contact them, so the Holy Woman comes back sooner, *hm?*"

"N-No!" Revireus objected at once.

"Why not?!" I raised my voice at him.

I just saw people turn into monsters before my eyes! The area outside the castle is still polluted with Kathra from the dead monsters and the only one who can purify it is Tina...!

"Jiril's right; now's not the time to be stubborn!"

"No," Revireus insisted. "Mother once told me that I have to be most careful when the Holy Woman comes! Because that's when we all grow too dependent on the Stella!"

"Ah...!" I gasped.

"We're the Holy Woman's guardians! So I think this isn't a situation where we should rely on her too blindly! I just do!"

"What do you mean, 'You just do'..." I heard Jiril murmur.

She exchanged a look with Mirage, and their expressions both seemed to imply they were wondering what he was talking about.

But I was taken aback by his words. Just like everyone else, I thought the Holy Woman would fix this if we just relied on her. That Tina would just show up and purify the monsters...and everything would be okay again.

But that's wrong! We can't push all these burdens on her! She's already working so hard as it is! And now, she can't even take a minute

out of her day to visit sick people? No, that's messed up!

Tina is just an ordinary girl, so she should be free to go wherever she pleases! We can't just force her to be wherever we need her, whenever we need her. That'd just be wrong! As her sister, I can't let everyone settle into the idea that they can just rely on Tina's monster-purifying powers whenever things get rough! We can't let the world start thinking she'll solve all their problems!

I remembered when Mom forced me to come with her after she got remarried. I was forced into a new life with a new family I could never fit in to, forced to study all the time...and I couldn't stand it there a minute longer!

"We just need to protect this place until Lady Tinaris returns," Sirius said. "She might complain when she returns, but thankfully Deshmel is a fortress, well-equipped to withstand a siege. We'll manage just fine for a few hours."

Everyone looked at each other, their expressions mixed.

"You make it sound too easy," Lys said. "Are we really gonna be all right, though? The area outside is full of Kathra, and I thought you couldn't block it off physically?"

Ugh, he's right...

His comment made me worry.

"Oh, you don't trust our barrier, hm?" Jiril said, puffing up her (sizeable) chest.

She was right. With the Mythicals' barriers set up, the Kathra shouldn't be able to get inside.

"So you're saying we're safe so long as we're indoors!" Aaron concluded.

"That's right, adventurer boy! Even if the enemy cracks the walls open, the Kathra won't penetrate inside unless they break the barrier, too."

"Buuuuut," Mirage said. "If they break the walls and mooooonsters come in, the barrier won't help with that. It can't block off physicaaaaaal obstacles."

So what do we do...?

Jiril and the Mythicals' barriers can block out the Camilla and the Kathra, but not physical projectiles. And if the fortresses' walls or doors are destroyed, the monsters might not be able to fit inside, but Edesa Kura's automatons and mechanized soldiers will.

That was how Edesa Kura was trying to exhaust our defenses. Mechanized soldiers and automatons weren't affected by the Kathra

or Camilla, and only the commanders manipulating the soldiers needed food.

Not that I know how they move their soldiers to begin with... I think they use alchemy to make those soldiers, but how do they control them? Some kind of machine?

Apparently, their mechanized soldiers weren't capable of performing any complicated combat tactics. Lys knew a lot about it, so I figured I'd ask him later.

"Well, they haven't destroyed the walls yet. If we set up a physical barrier, it could hold a few hours," Revireus said.

"Yes, understooooood, Master Revireus," Mirage said, placing an index finger to her cheek and cocking her head. "But are you suuuuuure we should do that? I think the Holy Woman might sulk if we doooooon't let her know."

She's got big boobs and is sexy enough as it is. Her making cute gestures like that is unfair! I wish I had that kind of figure... Actually, no. If my boobs got that big, it'd get in the way of my work.

"She probably will sulk," I said, shaking off my derailing thoughts. "But it's her first time going out in a while. We shouldn't disturb her."

"You're a sweet big sister, aren't you, *hm*?" Jiril patted me on the head. "I can appreciate that."

"Th-Thanks..."

Ugh, Jiril's got a killer body, too! Must be nice...

"Little Tinaris has been working so hard here in Deshmel, purifying monsters," Giyaga said. "She *can* set foot outside the fort walls sometimes, but spending every day fighting monsters must be exhausting!"

"You're right! She needs to be able to take a break every now and then!" Gina nodded. "I agree with Nakona!"

"Thank you, Giyaga, Gina!" I said.

"Okay, it's decided, then!" Aaron said. "So...what do we do now?"

"Well, gimme a second," Lys said, a bit reluctant. "I'll check up on the situation."

As her big sister, I'll hold the fort until Tina comes back!

It then dawned on me there were other reliable combatants present, like Shida's group!

Where did they go? They didn't get turned into monsters, did they...?!

I considered going out to look, but then I heard the distinctive footsteps of armored greaves coming from above. *Knights.*

They must be confused! Maybe we should focus on clarifying the situation right now.

The knights hurried down the stairs and raised their voices as soon as they appeared.

“Captain Lysteinn, we have a problem! Someone got injured!” a knight in red armor shouted.

“What?!” Lys cried.

The knights ran down the stairs with strained expressions and pointed to the second floor’s right door.

“A monster appeared from underground and bit the leg off of a worker trying to escape through the back entrance...!”

“...The Elf of the Sun’s in the fort, right?” Lys asked. “Could you ask him to use healing magic? Where did those demi adventurers go...?! Don’t tell me they’re outside... Mister Giyaga, do you have any tonics on hand?”

“Hrm...” Giyaga paused, trying to remember if he had any.

“W-We have some tonics!” Drek chimed in. “I just found some while cleaning things out. It’s been sitting unsold for two years now...”

He took out the recovery +5 high-grade tonic with Tina’s mark on it. Lys looked at it a moment, unsure what to make of it, but eventually said they would use it to at least stop the bleeding. He asked the knight to lead him to the hurt man. But, before leaving, he asked Aaron’s group to gather intel on the situation. I offered to help them out.

“Then let’s split up,” I said. “We’ll check how many people evacuated and how many are missing. If we find Shida, we’ll have him go to the infirmary! Lys, once you’re done stopping the bleeding, get the wounded worker over to the infirmary.”

“Understood. Where is it?”

“Right, you don’t know...” I murmured. “Fine, I’ll come with you then. Revireus, can you guys handle that, uh, physical barrier?”

“We’ll handle it!” Jiril said.

“Nooooo problem,” Mirage chimed in.

And so, we began checking on who made it into the castle and who wasn’t accounted for. Of those who’d made it to safety, we needed to figure out who could fight because, if worse came to

worst, we'd need any capable person we could get on our side.

Apparently, a mole monster had appeared in the back entrance and attacked the evacuees. That fearsome monster had bitten someone's leg off. The knights gave the man first aid, which staunched the bleeding and kept him alive. But he was still missing his leg.

Tina's Stella could recover lost limbs, but we could only put this person to sleep till she came back... A difficult choice, but a necessary one.

Or so I thought...until I entered the infirmary myself. The injured man lay on the bed, breathing heavily and weeping. "My leg! My leg..." he kept moaning and sobbing. He was so injured, he might pass out from sheer pain. Seeing him made me ask myself how I could think it was as simple as just waiting for Tina.

We really need to contact her and have her come back as quickly as possible, or this man might die from shock...

But while I was questioning myself, Lys and Drek handled the situation quickly.

"Oh, thank goodness for Tinaris! We have a blood-increasing potion, an anesthetic, and a supreme restorative!" Lys exclaimed. "Mister Drek, can you give us that... +5 recovery tonic? Have him drink it! It should soothe his pain and close the wound!"

"Yes! Here, have this," Drek said as he opened the crate we found earlier and tipped the tonic into the injured man's mouth.

A group of men, likely his friends, were watching from the infirmary entrance. The man painfully gulped down the potion. Thankfully, he was conscious enough to swallow.

A high-grade tonic can't heal lost limbs, but it should close the wound and stop the bleeding. Once he gets a blood-increasing potion, he'll be fine.

With that thought in mind, I started preparing bandages and hot water. Then suddenly, the patient's leg lit up.

"Huh?" Lys stared at him.

"Ah...?!" Drek exclaimed.

"What?!" I raised my voice in disbelief.

His leg started growing back from the bloodied stump before our very eyes. The knights in attendance and the man's friends also stared on in shock. His leg regrew, whole and healthy, from under his chewed pants leg. The man, who'd been crying just moments ago, stared as wide-eyed in shock as the rest of us.

“Huh? What... Wait...what is this...? I thought this was a high-grade tonic, right?! Not a Supreme tonic!” I said.

“Y-Yes!” Drek nodded desperately. “I Appraised it and it said it was a high-grade tonic...! With a +5 recovery effect...”

Lys picked up one of the four remaining tonics in the crate and Appraised it, too.

“Y-You’re right,” he said. “But...it still restored the missing limb? Does this mean the +5 effect pushes it to Supreme grade...? No, but, h-hm...that’s the only explanation...”

I wasn’t very good with Appraisal magic, but I used it and confirmed the facts for myself. Indeed, the spell identified it as a high-grade tonic, yet the fact remained—it had just restored a missing limb.

“I-It’s cured?” the man whispered in disbelief. “The tonic... fixed my leg...?”

“Yeah! Yeah, it did! It did, didn’t it? It healed him!” Drek raised his voice in a cheer. “Tinaris’s medicine really is incredible!”

“Tina...ris...?” the patient repeated her name. “The...the *Holy Woman*...?”

“Yes, little Tinaris made this tonic!” Drek nodded. “You’re one lucky man! This was a tonic Tinaris made two years ago! It’s astounding! That girl never ceases to amaze me! She actually made a tonic on the same level as a Supreme tonic!”

Hearing Drek repeatedly say that Holy Woman Tinaris made the tonic that saved his limb, the patient’s expression crumbled, and he began crying. He brought his hands together, brought them to his forehead, and sobbed profusely.

“The Holy Woman...! It was the Holy Woman’s medicine! *Ah, aaah, aaaah...!* Holy Woman! Holy Woman...!”

“O-Ooooh! It was the Holy Woman’s medicine! Incredible!”

“The Holy Woman’s miracle!”

The man’s friends stared in disbelief at first, but soon began cheering, prompted by Drek’s words. They chanted “All hail the Holy Woman!” and other such prayers. Even Lys’s knights were joining in. I found it all exasperating, but I couldn’t blame them.

“Yes, yes! All hail the Holy Woman!” Lys cut into their cheering with a sharp clap and started giving instructions. “It’s impressive indeed, but there are other injured people out there, right? The infirmary has a stock of tonics, so bring the patients here! Have whoever can’t walk drink half of one of the remaining

+5 high-grade tonics. Come on, everyone! Get moving! People's lives are on the line!"

"Y-Yes, sir!" the knights said, snapping to attention.

I should help out too!

"...Thank you, Holy Woman...!"

The man on the bed kept whispering words of thanks—not to any gods, but to Tina. And seeing that really made it sink in—

She really is the chosen one.

I looked at him for a moment. This was something I knew I should be proud of.

That's right. No matter how many people might look up to you as the Holy Woman, you'll always be you to me, Tina. My cute little sister! My precious family! The daughter Uncle Romulus gave his life to protect...and that's something I'll never forget.

"Hey, about what you just said," I told the man on the bed.

"Huh?" He blinked at me.

"Tell her that yourself when she comes back," I said with a grin.

And then, the man gave a smile so bright you wouldn't believe he was weeping just moments ago.

"Yes! I—I will!"



AFTER having all the injured people drink tonics, I dropped by Tina's room. I knew where she hid the key to the medicine storeroom—under her chair!

"There!"

I'd come here for mana restoratives.

I shifted one of her bookcases, revealing a door. Tina's room was probably the fort commander's room, so naturally, it had a secret room in it. Tina, of course, had reacted to its discovery by saying "Oh, this'll make for a good medicine storeroom!" Which told me she probably didn't realize what this room was actually for...

Behind the secret door was a wooden box containing her mana restoratives. I dragged the box out, returned the bookshelf to its original position, and hid the key in its spot again. I then picked up the box and carried it to the second floor's dining hall.

Waiting for me there were Lys's knights and Giyaga's caravan, along with Revireus, Jiril, Mirage, Sisiol, and Aaron's adventurer party.

I noticed an odd atmosphere when I came in and recognized why at once. The demi-human adventurers, Shida, Ledo, Sierro, and Kuula were there, too. That accounted for our combatants. They were all capable fighters. But the problem was the Kathra surrounding the castle.

"I brought Tina's mana restoratives," I said, trying to clear the air.

"Hmm...so *those* are the famous restoratives?" Shida asked dubiously as he picked up a bottle from the box. "That inexperienced Holy Woman whipped up something quite absurd, didn't she?"

"Is it really that big a deal?" I asked.

"Of course it is!" Lys exclaimed, his eyes wide in disbelief.

Tina said she made it pretty easily by adding mana to water... but right now, Sirius was staring at it with shock. His emotions didn't really show, but this must've been how he looked when surprised.

"I've heard rumors that a recipe for a mana restorative has been making the rounds, but I didn't think it really existed," he remarked. "So Tinaris made this, too..."

"Yeah?" I said, a little confused. "I mean, she did say she submitted it to the alchemical apothecary conference for evaluation."

"W-Well, yes, it was submitted. *Hm...*" Lys murmured. "But the source of the recipe wasn't disclosed. Lico and Elysis couldn't reproduce it and they told everyone else some unknown alchemist made it..."

"R-Really?" That was news to me.

So no one else can make it? I guess Tina's really impressive if she can, then...

I wondered if this was because she was a Spherit Folk, but I couldn't say that aloud. Not when some people were as dumb as Mina, who'd infiltrate Fort Deshmel just to get their claws on Spherit Stones.

"But if you've got this, you can use the Elf of the Sun's magic without any problems, right?!" one of Lys's subordinates asked, pinning an expectant look on Shida.

"I suppose..." Shida said indifferently.

Sirius furrowed his brows while Shida stayed expressionless. *He's oddly quiet...* It might've been the first time I saw him acting this unenthusiastic.

"Hmph!" Revireus snorted boastfully. "I can use amazing spells, too!"

"Don't try to compete with the demi-humans, Master Revireus!" Jiril trilled.

"But I really *am* curious!" Mina said. "I wanna see who can use stronger magic: Sirius's son or the Mythicals!"

Revireus glared at her dangerously. But I couldn't deny that the legends of the Elf of the Sun Renge had told us made me curious, too.

"Let's put aside that sort of talk for the time being," Sirius said. "We don't know how long it will be until Lady Tinaris returns. But we must hold on until she does. And we need to decide what to do after she comes back. We need to come to a decision."

"You're right," Shida said. "I'm curious as to which of us is stronger, but we'll need to figure that out some other time. Anyway, here's my report: all the injured people who've successfully evacuated into the castle are resting in the infirmary. Thanks to Tinaris making a lot of tonics, we haven't had any casualties inside. The problem is what's going on outside. Based on my count, we have about thirty knights from different countries dispatched to this castle, and I'm sad to say we've not found any of them indoors."

"They were all manning the walls per Marcus and Master Renge's instructions," Jiril said. "I'm sad to say this, but it's safe to assume they've all become monsters..."

Silence hung over us.

In other words, besides the monsters Edesa Kura brought with them, we can expect another thirty monsters out there. Can the people we have in here really handle that many?

"That's not all," Shida said grimly. "We can expect insects and other animals we kept outside to have been exposed to the Kathra and transformed into monsters, too. That said, it'll take them a day or two to grow giant."

"Oh, you're right...!" I burst in.

Shida's words were at least somewhat comforting. None of the monsters were the size of houses yet, which was a relief. There were a lot of them, but at least they weren't the same strength and

size as most of the ones we encountered in the wild lately.

“But still...if we count the animals and insects among their ranks, there might be a startling number of monsters out there,” I said. “Deshmel’s livestock, the insects in the fields and the soil... The walls might’ve already been broken through.”

“Yes. Hmmm... I imagine Edesa Kura’s automatons will be upon us soon,” Jiril said pensively. “We’ll set up a two-or-three-layer barrier. Those mechanical things have no mana, so they shouldn’t be able to penetrate them.”

“Then again, they don’t need food or water. Will we be all right on that front, sexy Mythical lady?” Lys asked.

“Hm? Don’t you know, alchemical knight boy? Fort Deshmel has an underground well. We don’t *need* to worry about water, hm?”

That was a relief. We were good for food and water. Well, our rations could run out, but Tina would return before that.

“Hey, wait...” Revireus said. “You said a *well*? That’s not connected to the outside, is it?!”

“*Hm*, I’m not sure,” Jiril responded. “I haven’t checked before...”

“This is seriously bad news! Even if it isn’t connected...!”

Revireus’s expression darkened and he shifted his gaze from Sirius to Shida, who both wore grave expressions as they realized what he was hinting at, to Jiril and Mirage, who hadn’t caught on yet.

What? What happened?!

“Sirius, is something wrong?” I asked.

“Water can conduct Kathra and Camilla with ease,” he replied. “Kathra in particular is said to seep into the ground from the air.”

“That’s how earthworms, snakes, centipedes, and moles can become monsters underground,” Shida said, explaining alongside his father. “Underground water veins can soak up the Kathra and keep it from being purified by the Air in the earth’s crust.”

“And in the process, it can turn aquatic creatures into monsters, too... Though that doesn’t matter right now,” Sirius finished.

“Kathra and Camila can do that?!” I asked.

“The water!” Shida exclaimed. “Order your people not to drink any water from the well! If enough of it scattered on the surface to be visible by eye, then it probably seeped through the earth and

into the well water! There's a chance it's polluted!"

All of us hopped up from our chairs.

So we can't draw well water?! I mean, we have some spare water set aside, but...

"This is bad!" I said. "We have to let the others know!"

"We told everyone to stay in their rooms!" Jiril said. "So I don't think anyone went underground, hm!"

"...Fine! I'll go check the underground well," Shida said. "Worst-case scenario, I can use my grimoire to burn the Kathra away."

"But Shida, won't that place too big a strain on your body?!" Sirius shouted.

Wait. Since when does Sirius raise his voice...?

"We have no choice. Or what? You want to call that inexperienced Holy Woman back?" Shida countered.

"Tch..."

It was my first time seeing Sirius this stressed out. He was always so flippant. Was it because Shida was his son?

The two of them glared at each other.

What is this? Is this what a father and son act like?

Sirius looked so concerned, but Shida...

"...I may as well say it now, old man," Shida said defiantly.

"...What?" Sirius asked hesitantly.

"I have never! Ever! Cared about the inheritance! You seem to think that I had my claim to the throne revoked because you're a half-elf, but I never *wanted* it to begin with! I am the Elf of the Sun! Chosen by the olden king's grimoire!"



Sirius seemed to wince.

"That's my pride and my greatest weapon! My purpose! Do you *truly* believe something as diminutive as a claim to the throne can compare to that?! Of all who live, I alone was picked to carry on that legacy! And that's *not* something I can attribute to your blood!"

I am...

I am Nakona Ril, daughter of Vice-captain Marcus Ril of De Marl's Azure Knights. And what Shida is saying is...well, he's being roundabout about it, but...

"You should simply take pride in having a wise, talented, skilled son, worthy of being a king! Fuhahahaha!" Shida punctuated his words with a pompous laugh.

"Why can't you be more sincere...?" Ledo whispered.

"Shut up!" Shida snapped at him.

Oh, I agree!

"Yes, you're right..." Sirius murmured. "My blood doesn't matter here. You've always been talented. I know that, of course..."

Where's this going now?

"You do take after your mother. Ahaha..." Sirius laughed.

"Grrr...!" Shida growled at him.

"But don't do anything reckless...!"

Is it just me, or is Sirius taking this in a negative direction? And Shida looks super upset... Oh, so this is why things are so strained between them!

"Agh! Enough!" Shida kvetched. "Ledo! Sierro! Kuula! You three stay here!"

"Oh, Shida's pouting!" Kuula exclaimed.

"I am *not* pouting!"

You totally are! I guess this happens a lot? Makes sense you'd be sulking so much about it, then... Guess I'll help out.

"You don't know where to go, right?" I asked. "I'll come with you."

"Mm?" Shida turned to look at me dubiously. "But how would you know? You don't live here, do you?"

"He's right, young miss. Plus, it's dangerous..." Lys objected.

"But Shida doesn't know how to get there, right? And you and your knights aren't this castle's guards. And Jiril's group—"

"Ohohoho!" Jiril laughed pompously. "Sacred Mythical Beasts

like us can't dirty ourselves by going underground!"

"Come to think of it, we've lived here for two years, but we've never gone down there," Revireus noted.

"You might have brooooooken something down there if you did go, Master Revireuuuus," Mirage said. "Pluuuus, as part of my race, I'm no goooood with underground, moiiiist places."

"....."

Yeah, they won't go there.

On top of that, the humans working here were just ordinary people who couldn't use techniques like me.

"Don't worry about me. I can fight if I have to," I told Lys.

"Then I should at least go with you—"

"You're the captain of your unit, Lys. You have responsibilities." I shook my head. "Don't worry! We're just going down to take a look!"

"I don't know..."

Why won't he trust me?! It's rude!

"Th-Then maybe I should..." Aaron raised a hand timidly.

"I said we're just going down to check!" I snapped at him.

"Y-Yes, ma'am..."

Cut it out! Not you too, Aaron?

"Aaron's and Ledo's groups should split up and warn the employees to stay in their rooms and not go underground! Got it? Go!" I ordered.

"Y-Yes!" Ledo said.

"Us, too?!" Aaron asked.

"Dammit, Aaron! You and your big mouth! We could be relaxing right now!" Mina complained.

"But you're gonna come along despite your complaints," Gina smiled. "Good going, little sis... What about you, Sirius?"

"Hm? I figured I'd make some tea and wait for you?" Sirius said jokingly.

"Stupid old man!" Gina and Mina scolded him together.

Okay, it's time to get moving already!

"Let's go!" I said.

"S-Sure," Shida said, notably less excited.

We took the door on the left of the first floor's landing and went all the way down the next hallway. As I opened the door to the left at the end of the hall, which revealed the staircase leading down, Shida floated by me.

Why is he floating...?

"Hey!" I chided him, thinking he was playing around.

"I sense monsters ahead," Shida said seriously.

"...!"

But why?! We're not underground yet! Oh no! Is it too dangerous to go on?

"Don't worry, it's just their presence for now," Shida said. "But it's coming from below."

"Does that mean there are monsters down there? Did they come in from outside?"

"I don't know. However, the Mythicals' barriers are stronger and more stable than the ones we can produce. I think it's more likely a monster was created within the barrier. It might be too late."

"Ugh..." I gritted my teeth.

"What do we do? Go back and call the Holy Woman?"

I squinted. That'd be the fastest solution. In fact, Tina would probably get mad and demand to know why we didn't call her back sooner. But she'd get mad at us anyway, for sure.

"No! This is Tina's chance to rest! Besides, I only came along because I wanted to talk to you."

"Mm? I'll let you know, I have no interest in flat girls," he said off-handedly.

"I oughta kill you," I growled.

I know I'm not the most endowed girl but still! I'm bigger than Tina! Not that I'd say that to her face...

"No! I mean about what happened earlier! It's because you had to word things like that that Sirius misunderstood."

"Ugh, what is it, girl? You tagged along to lecture me?" Shida, who'd begun floating down the staircase, threw a glare at me over his shoulder.

"Not a lecture! Just a suggestion. Wording things differently, even just a bit, can make things come across completely different."

He's just not being sincere.

Well, he is sixty...or is it seventy now? Anyway, in human years, he's an old man! And if he's such a sourpuss with this much life experience, maybe nothing'll change him at this point, but...

"Why don't you just call him Dad?"

He stared at me with a really displeased expression.

"Is this a joke? Do I look like I'm the age to do that?"

“Well, yeah, you totally do.”

Shida looked like a ten-year-old boy, meaning he looked about the same age as René. *No one would bat an eye if he called his father “Dad.”*

“Ugh! This isn’t about appearances!” he shot back.

“Calling him an old man won’t get your feelings across,” I said calmly. “If you want to free Sirius from his guilt, wording yourself wrong and spoiling the mood will just make things weird.”

Shida fell silent.

I had never been to the elven country, but I heard about it from Dad. The high elves govern over a community of ordinary elves, dark elves, and half-elves who used to live separately in their own countries. So Shida having a high elf mother and a half-elf father meant they had quite the difference in social standing.

I could only guess, but there must’ve been some kind of great romance between his parents. I heard the elves were quite prideful, and Shida certainly gave that impression. That pride made those caste differences all the more pronounced.

“What would a *human* like you know—”

“I can tell by looking at you,” I said. “And let me tell you, you’re obvious enough that even an onlooker could tell how insincere you are.”

He scowled at me.

“Why don’t you think about this the other way?” I proposed.

“Th-The other way?”

Yeah, he’s a pain! But I do get it.

When I was younger, I felt abandoned by my mom and ran away to Dad. But when I came to Rofola, Tina was there. She was out of shape and weak, but somehow, I could tell there was something special about her.

So I could kind of understand how Sirius felt and why Shida, as his son, was so conflicted. Sirius probably went adventuring with Aaron’s group because he couldn’t stand to stay in Forestria. I’d done the same thing when I ran from mom.

On top of all that, Shida is the Elf of the Sun. And while a son isn’t exactly like a stepsister, I *did* know the mixed feelings and loneliness of having someone special in the family.

But I could also understand a bit of how Shida felt, too. Wanting to get along with your family—that feeling in particular.

When I first met Tina, I found fault with everything she did

even though all I'd wanted was to get along with her. And that kind of resistance was probably much harder when directed at one's birth father.

"Just think of it as a solution. Saying that one word might be hard, but it's all that it takes to fix this. I don't know how many years it's been since you called him that, but it's probably that simple. Oh! And you should probably tell him that privately, 'cuz talking about this in public will just make you get all stubborn like earlier."

"I-In private? Not with a pretty girl, but that old man?"

I could hear the disgust in his voice.

"Maybe you could have a drink?" I suggested. "I haven't had the chance to drink with Dad recently, but...drinking with him is pretty fun. It's a good way to relax with your parents."

Shida stared at me with a very weird expression.

Oh, don't tell me he thinks...

"Just so you know...despite appearances, I'm twenty."

"Wh-What?! What are you, some kind of unaging human?!" He gawked at me.

"E-Excuse you! I do *too* age! And mature! I mean, I know I'm baby-faced, but... Actually, no! I don't have to justify myself here and it's not like *you're* one to talk!" I gestured to all of him.

"So what you're saying is...you've already fully matured. So there's no further potential for growth in you—" His eyes went straight to my chest.

"Wanna see what dying feels like?" I threatened.

Where does this kid keep looking?! If he keeps saying stuff like that, I reserve the right to kill him. You wanna talk crap? Fine by me, I'll pummel you like a sandbag until Sirius won't recognize your face!

"...Wait!" Shida suddenly said.

"Ah!"

I froze with my fist swinging. Shida carefully looked down the stairs.

...I think I just heard something too...

I could hear the pattering of bare footsteps below. There was a landing down this staircase. Since the staircase was made of stone, we could easily hear what sounded like wet footsteps.

"What's below here?" Shida asked me.

"Well, there's a landing. Then a spiral staircase made of stone," I answered. "There's a pretty large space on the bottom, and that's

where the well is. It's pretty cold, so we sectioned off some of the area to serve as a pantry."

"Hm... They probably came down here to inspect the food and water, then..." Shida replied pensively. "Their category is monster," he said abruptly, looking down into the darkness. "Danger level C. Human-type. There's three of them..."

"Th-Three of them?!"

Oh, no! Does this mean the underground area is already full of Kathra?!

"Let's lock them inside the well room before they climb out!" I said.

"I have a better idea than that." Shida shook his head.

"What is it?"

Shida opened his book. *The olden king's grimoire...*

"Ye firm and unyielding ones! Those who shield from pain, deflect the claws of assailants, and crush fangs with their strength. I pray here and now, beseeching for your courageous might. Know my name. For it is Shida Forestria—Di Wall!"

"Ah!" I exclaimed.

The book's letters lit up, and walls of clay grew from the staircase, reaching up to the ceiling. A perfect, seamless wall had appeared before us.

H-H-Hold up...!

"This should give us the time we need," Shida said off-handedly. "Have the Holy Woman purify them when she gets back."

"Y-Yeah, okay," I muttered.

"My word... I can't believe we have to go *this* far just so the Holy Woman can have some time off. Though I suppose what you and Revireus said does have some merit. Letting her shoulder all the burdens can't be good. Holy Women are rare occurrences and relying on her too much might make us and our world too dependent on a Holy Woman's presence. Just like with the olden Holy Woman, Saint Akari-Berz. The people demanded she use the Stella to achieve the impossible, and when she failed, they persecuted her."

"What?! They...persecuted their Holy Woman...?!"

"That's what the records say. I suspect Revireus's mother—the ruler of all Mythicals, Curalius—had her misgivings about that. You humans have a way of relying on whatever aids them at the time, but are quick to turn your backs on it. Forcing you to remember the

blessings you are given from time to time might do you good.”

Shida said this with a smirk.

“...Shida,” I muttered, lost for words.

He's right... This is a good, hard reminder for me too. The monsters were always a menace. But now we have Tina around to purify the Kathra and Camilla, doing away with those creatures, making it easy to forget how much of a threat they are. She's...seriously amazing!

I once again realized how crucial the Stella was, and how amazing Tina was for wielding it.

“And...about what you said earlier,” Shida said with a little less confidence. “About...drinking.”

“Hm? Oh, you mean with Sirius? When are you gonna do it?”

“D-Don't make it sound so easy! To begin with, both he and I have companions to attend to, so we can't sit down for a drink that easily. And Deshmel is too crowded. Put simply, it's a matter of the right time and place. ...You see my point?”

“Yeah, yeah, stop complaining and procrastinating about it.” I shrugged him off. “Just go do it in Rofola or something! You can have your friends stay in separate rooms and we have a coffee corner in the main building. You can drink there at night.”

“...That's an idea...”

“But first, we need to fix this situation, so Fort Deshmel is safe until Tina gets back. And once we're done sorting things out here, you can come back with me to Rofola... Yeah, and it'll be good timing, since all of you could help us harvest fruit from the trees! Right, forced labor for you all! I'll work you all so hard you'll be exhausted! You and Sirius look like slackers, so I'm sure you'll have plenty of energy left. And after your bath, you can come over to the lounge and we'll serve you some drinks.”

A perfect plan, if I do say so myself!

Shida stared at me expressionlessly as I puffed up my chest boastfully over my good idea.

What, you don't like it? I challenged him with my eyes.

“You're one nosy woman, you know that?” he said.

“Huh?”

“Fine, I'll take you up on that offer,” Shida scoffed at me. “It's not often I get a chance to speak to the old man frankly.”

“You don't have to put it like that! Just come over to our place for a drink.” I shrugged. “We'll make it cheap.”

“So *you're* gonna make me pay for it!”

“Of course I am!”

We butted heads for a moment, then both smirked and laughed.



And that's a deal! Well, I guess kids fight with their parents, no matter what race or age they are.

"...Such a nosy woman..." I heard him mutter under his breath.

"Mm?"

"No, nothing. Let's go back up."

"All right."



THE next day, Tina returned to the fort, cradling her head. Upon returning last night, Tina learned of the situation and spent the night purifying the area with Renge. The walls were greatly damaged, but they were able to revert the transformed animals and humans to their original form.

Renge swept up all the mechanized soldiers and automatons approaching the castle with what Tina described as a "SWOOSH!"

Renge's power is terrifying enough to scare even other Mythicals. And honestly, I'm startled, too. I didn't know he was that strong!

"Y-You look tired, Tina," I told her.

"Like you wouldn't believe!" she chided me. "Why didn't you call me back sooner?!"

"Well..."

"I mean, I did get to chat a lot with Curalius and heard the date for Elysis's funeral thanks to that, but..." she trailed off.

"...Yeah. Sorry," I said uncomfortably.

She probably felt guilty, thinking that the people who ended up getting turned into monsters wouldn't have had to go through that if she were here. *And she's right. If she had been in the fort when the monsters died, their Kathra wouldn't have been around to cause trouble. The walls wouldn't have been destroyed to begin with!*

But in the end, the only thing Edesa Kura's forces had achieved was damaging our walls.

...At least, that's how it should've been.

"No, Nakona and the others might've really saved us this time around," Renge, who was standing behind Tina, narrowed his eyes.

"Why's that, Renge?" Tina turned to face him.

"Hm? What do you mean?" I asked him.

"Deshmel is the world's navel. Edesa Kura probably really *did*

want to recapture it. But that was only a secondary objective for the Dwarf inside the Bottle. What that thing really wanted was to confirm if the Holy Woman was here.”

“Really?”

I could only see the top half of his face because of his scarf, but based on how his brows were furrowed, it was clear his expression was severe.

They were trying to confirm...if Tina was here?

“For all that thing’s concerned, the Holy Woman and the Stella are the things it needs eliminated the most. After all, it went to great lengths to produce all this Kathra. Having it purified thwarts its plans.”

Tina and I both fell into stunned silence.

“Rumors of Tina are spreading around the continent, and Deshmel has a monster-attracting barrier, which makes it a prime place for her to purify the monsters. It only makes sense he wanted to check here for her. But the automatons and mechanized soldiers I destroyed didn’t have any of his extensions. So, seeing the walls destroyed and Kathra spreading was probably enough for him to conclude she wasn’t here. There are some remnants of its smell in the area, so that abomination was definitely here at one point.”

“So you’re saying...the Dwarf inside the Bottle came here to look for me...?” Tina hung her head anxiously.

Dad and his group weren’t trying to spread any rumors about the Holy Woman, but they weren’t denying them, either. All the countries have realized Tina exists, and rumors of her have spread as far as the demi-human and Mythical continents. So even Edesa Kura, isolated as it is, must’ve caught wind of it.

I imagine they’re gathering intelligence as we speak...

“So it saw that the monsters busted through the walls without getting purified and assumed Tina wasn’t here?” I asked. “I mean... she really wasn’t!”

“Probably. I’ll admit some of this might be wishful thinking on my part.”

Gina threw a sideways glance at Renge and Tina. Renge said he was hoping this would be the case. But come to think of it, the Holy Woman was becoming quite important to everyone in the world, both practically and politically speaking. Everyone wanted to know her whereabouts, but having Edesa Kura know gave me a bad feeling.

“What if it...finds out I have the Stella...? What will I do then?” Tina asked anxiously, grabbing onto Renge’s sleeve.

Renge crouched down to Tina’s eye level and brought his face close to hers. He gently wrapped his hands around hers and I could see him smiling under his scarf.

“Don’t worry. I’m here with you. I’ll keep you safe,” he said.

“...Y-Yeah...” Tina looked up at Renge, a blush creeping over her cheeks.

...Huh? What am I watching here? Are they showing off, or what?

Tina looked at Renge, blushing profusely, and Renge looked back at her with a gentle gleam in his eyes.

Huh? Tina, what were you so worried about the other day? You’re both totally in love with each other. Don’t tell me you haven’t noticed...!

But on second thought, it made sense. Tina was always a bit dense about this sort of thing. Some of our guests came to Rofola hoping to woo her, but she’d never realized it. *Of course, Dad and I always got in those guys’ way...*

I mean, Tina’s fifteen now, but she was twelve or thirteen back then. That’s too soon to think of marriage!

But even with that in mind, she was dense. And Renge was just as dense as she was. *Maybe I can’t blame him for it because he’s a Mythical and their understanding of things like this is different from humans, but his attitude toward Tina is just...different from how he regards everyone else.*

Well, he does seem to follow her around because he wants sweets. But still, he looks at her different!

It’s like every time I see them together, they get closer. Like, physically close.

They’re staring into each other’s eyes. I mean, it’s like time’s standing still for them. Really, what’s with you two? Just hook up already!

“We’re done checking the knights who got turned into monsters,” a familiar voice called out to me.

“Oh! Lys,” I turned around to look at him.

He approached me, clad in his black armor. He wore a black cloak that he didn’t have on before. Now that he was a captain, he needed to have some decorations on his armor.

Well, Lico wears pretty unique armor, I guess. Maybe if Lys keeps moving up in the world, he’ll end up wearing his own customized armor,

too!

Oh, that sounds pretty cool! I wish I could wear some cool, rugged armor, too!

“So, what’s going on outside?” I asked him.

“Well, the walls got smashed up pretty badly,” he said. “The fields have been ravaged pretty bad and the barns are wrecked—”

“And times like these are when I get to shine!” a voice cut into our exchange.

“Ledo!” I turned to look at the dwarf.

Shida and Ledo descended from behind Lys. Shida was levitating.

Oh, right, Ledo was here too! Talk about good timing to have a dwarf around!

“Are you going to help us rebuild the fort, Ledo?” Tina asked.

“Sure!” he nodded with a grin. “I can’t help much with the fields, though.”

“I can help you level the ground for the walls,” Shida said off-handedly.

“Thank you, Shida!” Tina exclaimed.

“Hold up!” We saw a figure run—no, almost roll—down toward us.

“Mister Giyaga?!” we all exclaimed.

Hold up, calm down! You might fall and hurt yourself!

“I need Shida to help me develop the automatic selling magic thing!” Giyaga told us. “I’ll have my people help rebuild the walls in his place!”

“R-Right! Shida, you help develop the automatic selling spell!” Tina insisted.

“Now, hold on a minute,” Shida shook his head. “I said I’d wait, but I never said a thing about helping you develop it. If this was a pretty woman asking me, it’d be one thing. But I’m not going to waste time on a request from a stuffy old man and a curveless girl.”

“Hey! I take offense at that!” Giyaga and Tina snapped at him.

Right, I almost forgot he’s that kind of jerk. So we’ll need to find a pretty woman to ask him to do it for us?

I was all for that automatic selling magic, since it sounded very useful!

“Ugh... Fine, I’ll find some beauties to ask you. So, help us out, would you?” Tina sighed. “Will Jiril and Mirage do?”

“Who do you take me for?” Shida cocked an eyebrow at her.

“Why aren’t they good enough?” Ledo asked. “They’re pretty and full in all the right places. I thought any beauty would work for you?”

“Not you too, Ledo,” Shida glared at him.

So Tina’s right and those two really were in his strike zone, huh? Figures.

I thought the same way, but Shida seemed terribly displeased.

“Well...I won’t deny they’re attractive. But I’m nearing seventy. It might be time for me to consider settling down,” he said.

“What? What brought this sudden change on?”

“Hey, Nakona. Marry me. Do that and I’ll help you make that automatic selling spell you’re all clamoring about!”

...Huh?!

“Huuuuh?!” Lys stepped in front of me and started shrieking at Shida. “Excuse me, sir, what are you saying? You, marry the young miss? What? What’re you sayiiiiing?!”

“Huh?!” Tina stood beside me, her hands flying to cover her reddening face. “Wait, Shida, what? You want Nakona to...to...to... S-Since when?!”

“Hm. Since yesterday,” Shida said off-handedly. “She’s quite sweet when she smiles, and she looks young enough to be a good fit for me! Plus, she’s quite durable and strong for a human and knows how to fight, to boot! *Hm!* I daresay she’s the perfect specimen!”

“What?!” Lys glared at him.

Wait, whaaaat? D-Did...did he just say something absurd?

“Shida...” Ledo stared at him in disbelief.

“...Are you serious about this, Elf of the Sun?” Renge asked him.

“Quite serious! And if that thing in the sky were to come crashing down on us, I wouldn’t be able to look for the perfect bride now, would I? So I decided I’d settle for you!”

“Y-You...!” Lys made to draw his weapon in anger.

But for some reason—maybe because of how absurd and unrealistic his words were—my mind felt awfully calm and clear. Or rather...I was more occupied with Ledo’s silent expression and Renge’s serious countenance.

“Hey, Ledo, I heard what he just said, but what did he really mean?” I asked.

“Huh? Ah... You can tell?” Ledo asked with a frown.

“I mean, with how absurd this is, I’d figure something’s off,” I said with a sardonic smile.

“Huh? What do you mean?” Tina asked, baffled.

I mean, given his—given Shida’s personality—it’s obvious there’s more to this...

“*Hmph!* So you even have good intuition!” Shida grinned. “All the more worthy of being my wife!”

“Stop the bravado and explain yourself,” I sighed. “Why did you say that?”

“...Elf of the Sun, I understand your concerns. But it’s not set in stone yet,” Renge told him.

“No, but we should prepare for it, either way.”

“Prepare for what?” I asked.

There really *was* more to this. Renge stared at him fixedly a moment, then dropped his shoulders in resignation.

“...It’s the curse,” Renge said.

“Curse?”

“The Olden King’s curse—Privilege of the King,” Renge replied. “In order to make sure its great power isn’t abused, the grimoire puts a curse on anyone capable of opening it who isn’t Leishi. That curse casts some kind of burden on the user. And in *your* case, Shida, it’s a curse that stops you from maturing, correct?”

“Indeed,” Shida nodded, with an arrogant, indomitable smile.

I stared at him silently. *So the reason Shida looks like a kid is because of a curse? He was talking such a big game yesterday, and he was shouldering a curse the whole time? Lame.*

“Okay, so, what does that have to do with me marrying you?” I cocked an eyebrow.

“There are conditions to lifting the Privilege of the King,” Renge said. “A friend’s prayer, a dearly beloved’s kiss, and *my* words to lift the curse.”

“You really were a friend to the Elf of the Sun, weren’t you?! The elves have long tried to lift the curse, ever since the Olden King’s time. But we never knew the last thing required to do it! It remained a mystery, as if there was never a way to actually lift the curse...” Shida hung his head, quite the opposite of his usual, haughty self.

And that made me realize: Sirius. Shida’s father, the archaeologist who traveled the world.

So that's why...

It all made sense. He was a father, after all. And Shida realized what he was doing, which only made him all the less willing to feel indebted to him.

You're trying to live your life, holding onto your personal pride. You understand and take pride in being his son. You want to express it, but you can't and end up always spoiling the mood. You're just...an awkward boy.

"Well...those are my reasons," Shida said simplistically. "But having her...having Nakona be my wife to break the curse might seem a bit hasty—"

"I'm fine with marrying you," I said.

"Huh?!" Tina and Lys jumped in shock.

I could understand their surprise. But, having understood it all now, this perverted elf felt almost...charming to me.

Despite being the one to make the offer, Shida stared at me with surprise. I merely puffed up my chest proudly.

"What? Y-You are?!" Ledo asked.

"I am. But why are *you* asking me that?" I turned back to Shida. "Yeah, I'm fine with marrying you. I mean...I'm getting to the age where I should consider that, too."

"What?!" Lys squeaked. "But young miss, wait! Why marry that runt of an elf when you have so many better options? Like me, and me, and me—"

"No," I shook my head.

I always wondered if I would have a special person. Not that I thought of Shida as my special person before now.

But what had happened these last few days made me understand all sorts of things about him, and now I couldn't just let him suffer after everything I knew. There was a time when I thought my father had neglected me. But that wasn't true; I was loved and cherished. And Shida was the same.

But his problem was he couldn't express himself properly and he needed help with that. So maybe I wasn't so opposed to looking after this awkward, show-off of a little elf.

"Well... I don't mind how clumsy and awkward you are, so I guess I can settle for you, too," I said with a smile.

"...H-Hmph," Shida scoffed bashfully. "You say you'll 'settle' for the mighty Elf of the Sun? You're one brazen girl."

"Of course I am," I smirked. "Who do you take me for? I'm the

daughter of Marcus Ril, former Vice-captain of De Marl's Azure Knights, and the older sister of Holy Woman Tinaris! If you weren't at least the Elf of the Sun, I'd be way out of your league."

Shida's eyes widened in surprise. But he soon smiled.

"Wow, Nakona... Are you serious about this?" Tina stared at me.

"No... Young miss, say it isn't so...!" Lys bemoaned.

"Yeah, I'm totally serious," I said. "Why're you acting so shocked, Lys?"

"Nakona, you can't be serious..." Tina dropped her head in exasperation.

Lys crumbled to his knees in shocked silence.

Seriously, what's his problem? Weirdo...

"I do have my conditions, though," I told Shida.

"Hm?"

"Like I said, you have to help develop the automatic selling magic. And, on top of that, you have to marry into my family."

"...Very well," Shida said after a moment's pause.

"You're fine with that?!" Ledo exclaimed in uncharacteristic surprise.

It took him a loooooong moment to give his answer. But then again, Shida was elven royalty. That meant he had considerations to make.

Maybe this was a bad condition to bring up.

"That said, we'll only marry after that black ball in the sky is taken care of," Shida said.

"Huh?" I blinked. "You want to marry me only *after* the Sugula is dealt with? Well... Fine by me."

"Yes. Having you by my side would give me a reason to come back alive if the worst-case scenario happens," Shida nodded.

I wasn't sure what he meant. But I did see Renge close his eyes behind me. Shida looked up at me one more time, and then levitated in the air, now eye level with me.

"Now, go ahead and lift the curse on me! Friend of the Elf of the Sun! I want a dashing, mature body that will make my wife fall head-over-heels for me, so she can pamper and adore me!"

"Uhh..." Renge said, a bit uncomfortable. "It will take you some time to mature. In your case, the curse didn't reverse your age; the grimoire simply kept you the age you were when you took hold of it. Hmmmm. Nakona, I'm just confirming the facts with you

here, but he *will* start aging after this happens. Meaning, he'll become a full-grown, adult male elf. A perverted elf... A-Are you really all right with that?"

As he spoke, he pointed at Shida, who stiffened in place.

...Seriously?

"Fine, I guess..." I eventually said.

"You agree to that?!" Tina stared at me again.

"I think you might be a little too generous here, Nakona..."
Giyaga said.

"Not really?"

"No, no, no, no! You're definitely too generous!" Tina, Giyaga, and Lys all snapped at me at once, shaking their heads.

It's strange how in sync those three are...

Renge furrowed his brows, too, looking oddly bothered.

Yeah, Shida looks ten, so marrying him might look a bit criminal. But hey, he's actually seventy! So he's much creepier than me, when you think about it!

"I don't think I'm in a position to say anything else, then..."
Renge eventually said. "I hope you'll be...happy together?"

"You too," I said mischievously.

"Eh?" he blinked.

"Don't worry. I'll say it again when the time comes."

"Huh?"

...Oh, yeah. How am I going to tell Dad about this?

♣Me at Age Fifteen: Side Story

EVER since moving from Rofola to the world's navel, Deshmel, my life had changed quite a bit. The biggest difference was I no longer had to handle customers; Fort Deshmel wasn't an inn. So while I still cooked and brewed medicine, it felt a bit off with no guests to sell them to. At least it let me create a massive stockpile that helped out when people got hurt in the fields or in the fort.

"E-Excuse me, Holy Woman?"

"Yes?"

At this point, I'd gotten used to being addressed as Holy Woman, but it still felt a bit strange. At first, I had asked people at every turn to stop calling me that. But no one listened. The Mythicals were especially insistent on it and eventually, I just gave up.

This time, the person calling out to me was a former slave who needed something. It was a tall woman living and working in Fort Deshmel named Eva. She had greasy, uncombed hair that reached down to her knees, and she was quite jittery and timid. She was tall but also extremely thin, making her figure look very unbalanced. She cared little for her appearance and always wore the same clothes.

I got the feeling that if she cared more about grooming herself, she'd be very pretty. But...apparently something terrible had happened to her after Edesa Kura took her captive, and she now simply insisted she looked fine the way she did. I couldn't exactly argue with that.

She can worry about that kind of stuff once her heart heals.

Eva stopped me, looking as jittery and scared as ever. I was surprised she even spoke to me, though I was happy she felt she could.

"Ah, I, *hmm...er...*"

"Calm down," I said, trying to soothe her. "Do you want to talk in my room?"

"I-I'm sorry..."

“Don’t be. I’m happy to speak with you.”

Perhaps she was worried about other people watching us, because she seemed uncomfortable talking in the hallway. So I had her follow me to my room instead. The women in the fort sometimes came to me for advice on foundation, cosmetics, or other sensitive issues.

Maybe Eva’s finally taken an interest in such things?

If *that* was the case, I wanted to help her out. I urged her to take a seat on one of the sofas in my room and share what was on her mind.

“You can take your time. I’m here to listen to anything you have to say. Is something on your mind?” I asked.

“Well, yes... Actually, the women in Deshmel—er, rather, the women living in the fort right now are all former slaves. So they... well, yes, that includes me too, but...well, they’ve got some pretty rotten personalities.”

“Huh?” I stared at her. “Uhhh...”

That was not the topic I was expecting.

Her words were roundabout as she slowly started to explain herself. But, after piecing together what she had said, the bigger picture was like this: the former slaves currently living in Fort Deshmel were all people who’d had their countries destroyed by Edesa Kura during the war fifteen years ago or people who’d been abducted or sold due to poverty.

Some of those people were adventurers and travelers. But to Edesa Kura, they were nothing but consumable resources. That whole attitude trampled all over their dignity.

And that act of indignation had warped their hearts and twisted their sensibilities. So, without me knowing it, the women of the fortress had begun bullying and tormenting each other in the terrible, wicked way only women were capable of.

“Wh-When we were in the facility, th-there was someone in the same cell as me. Her name was Konita, she was...very kind to me...” Eva stuttered.

“You mean the same Konita I know?” I asked, thinking of the person I knew by that name.

“Y-Yes. I-I was...I am no good with words. I’m weak. So no one...no one listens to me...”

“I see. Go on.” I nodded to show I was listening.

The person she was talking about was still here in Fort

Deshmel, but her workplace was different from Eva's, so they didn't have many chances to interact. Eva preferred to be alone, but since Konita was kind to her back when they were slaves, the two of them stayed close enough to chat when they did have the opportunity to meet up.

But Eva had noticed something was wrong with Konita recently, so she'd tried to find out what had happened to her.

She's so strong, I thought to myself, but didn't say it out loud for fear it would prevent her from saying more.

Eva explained how she soon found out the issue was bullying and abuse from the other women in the fort. I didn't ask for details on the exact extent their bullying went, but what she had already told me was enough to know it wasn't pleasant.

"I-I... Going to the knights for help just feels... It feels..." she stammered. "A-And telling you about it...feels w-wrong, too... B-But..."

"I understand. It's fine."

She swallowed her tears for a moment.

"Well...I think I understand..." I muttered.

Bullying...

It didn't matter what world, era, or social class they were from, bullying happened wherever people gathered and there was an opportunity for someone to feel superior or desire something another has. In my past life, it'd happened to me. I knew what it felt like to be on the receiving end.

But bullying isn't something that ends that easily...

Someone stepping in to stop it half-heartedly only means another person becomes the victim instead. The only real way to stop it is for the victim to stand up for themselves and fight back against the bullies. At least that was my experience...

"There really is a great deal of stress building up here, isn't there...?" I said.

"I, well, yes, I-I do feel that's the c-case..."

Maybe we can come up with some kind of pastime that'd help them let off steam, so they won't think of bullying? Something women like and lose themselves in and something I can help with... Ah, I know!

"I've got it," I said, clapping my hands together. "We can hold a fashion show!"

"Huh? A fash—"

"That's right! A fashion show!"



WITH that plan in mind, I summoned all the women in Deshmel to the fort's dance hall the following day. They stood there, confused. Jiril the dryad and Mirage the lamia were also there.

"It's time to hear from the Holy Woman, *hmm*," Jiril said after everyone was in attendance.

"Starting today, we'll have a monthly fashion show here at the fort!" I said excitedly. "I'll select two women who I feel aren't smiling enough, and they'll be our models for the month. We'll assign them to the west and east camps, depending on where they work, and each side will work together to make that model beautiful, with Jiril and Mirage offering support! I asked the knights on the wall to be our judges!"

"Let me tell you now! We won't accept any half-hearted work, *hmm*!" Jiril said. "We'll ask the Holy Woman to produce skin care products and body creams to suit the models' skin!"

"And figure matteeeers too! Some of you need to put a little extra weight on after being starved for sooooooo long as slaves!" Mirage trilled. "The model is to spend that moooonth minding her health and figure, as well as changing her way of thinking after so much time in slavery to help boost her confideeeence as a free woman!"

"You'll need to prepare the model's outfit, do her hair, and handle her makeup! There's a mountain of things to do!" Jiril appended.

"And *I* will present my handmade sweets to the winner!" I declared.

"The Holy Woman's sweets?!" Everyone in the room seemed to really start listening then.

My sweets used honey taken from our beehives in Mount Rofola. I used sugar sometimes too, but it was expensive and hard to come by for commoners. As such, my sweets were *very* popular around the fort. And they'd be our prize.

And we'd have the handsome, young knights see the results and draw their attention. They'd see the fruit of everyone's labor, not just the models'. *After all, people shine when they work hard for it.*

Plenty of women around the fort were interested in the knights manning the walls, so many of them would partake in my event just for the chance to sink their claws into one. After all, each nation

had sent their most handsome knights here (to win me over, but let's ignore that fact), and the single women were quite drawn to them. After all, knights were educated and were in a much better position to move up in society, even if they were originally commoners.

This was a world where bandit and monster attacks were rampant, and knights could fight them off. Plus, they were government officials who earned a stable, above-average wage. They were dependable mates. And for these destitute, often orphaned, women, marrying someone with a country they could go back to was an appealing prospect. This was a great opportunity for them to meet and really get to know the knights!

So I was sure they'd go for it. And indeed, even the women who started out questioning why they needed to make another woman pretty immediately agreed once they realized this was an excuse to get to know the knights and eat my sweets.

Yay! Good to see you're all motivated!

"Then I'll select the models for this month now," I said. "Take these women and make them beautiful and healthy in both mind and body and overflowing with confidence. The east camp's model will be Eva! And the west camp's model will be Konita!"

"Huh?!"

"What?!"

As I called out their names, the other women reacted in different ways. Envy, confusion, and unease at the possibility of having their bullying discovered. The bullies stiffened. I had Mirage and Jiril look into which women were doing the bullying, so they'd be placed in charge of making sure the models were beautiful and mentally and physically healthy. Mirage and Jiril would make sure they couldn't bully them during the process, either.

Konita would never have the confidence needed to win as their model if they kept treating her poorly, and those who had looked away from the bullying or just didn't notice until now wouldn't keep quiet about it anymore, either. After all, none of the ladies here would want to give up on a chance to meet and marry a nice man with a stable job. *And a chance to get rare sweets too!*

I had assumed some might pick their pride over their future. But then, everyone else would see them as nuisances and fools that would endanger their friends' futures for the petty sake of pride. They would become the next targets. And while that wasn't a good

thing by any means, *if* that happened, I'd just pick those women to be the next models. It might sound convoluted, but it was the best way to make sure no one suffered in the dark.

And by doing this fashion show, the women of Deshmel would develop a sense of aesthetics. Hygiene, health, clothes, shoes. If they grew interested and occupied with those things, they wouldn't have the time to think of bullying. And the more they learned and experimented with this new hobby, the more they could bond with the other women over it. After all, having a common hobby brings people together from all different cultures!

And by giving the other women makeovers, they would get to see someone rejoice at being made beautiful at their hands, and that would make them happy, too. And so, hopefully, things would change for everyone here, bit by bit.

Yep, it's a good idea all around! Assuming it goes well. But I'll just have to make sure it does!

"Confident women exude beauty, you know! Please work together to make these models confidently gorgeous!"

It's going to be a hard road, but you have to push through it! We need to make Deshmel a better place to live in for everyone!



"**HOLY** Woman, we need to ask your advice on something!"

"Yes, what is it?"

The east camp women in charge of Eva often came to me for help. *Yet the west camp's ladies don't consult me at all...*

"It's about the face cream and moisturizer you made. They don't seem to suit Eva's skin."

"We don't mean to be rude, but can't you make some moisturizer that suits her perfectly?"

"I could...but how about I teach *you* how to make it while I'm at it? If you make it yourselves, it'll be easier to figure out what kind will suit Eva's skin."

"What?! You can teach us?!" the women all exclaimed.

The idea of *making* face cream and moisturizer hadn't occurred to them. But really, the best solution for people with sensitive skin is to try to see what suits them and make their own cosmetics. It certainly saves both time and money. But that also required the

time and resources to experiment with.

“Sure. First write down what troubles your skin has,” I suggested. “Then we can pick ingredients that’ll help. Please ask Eva what troubles she has too.”

“W-We will!” they said and scurried off.

Not long after that, the women on Eva’s side came to the second-floor dining hall to make the moisturizer, with a lot of notes written down about their assorted skin problems. At first, I thought we’d meet in my room, but since so many people had turned up, we’d decided to use the dining hall.

Normally I’d just mix something up with alchemy, but the women couldn’t do that, so we had to do things the hard way.

Alchemy was so second nature for me by now, I was unconsciously recovering mana. This was something most people couldn’t do without a great deal of practice. In that regard, I felt like I’d matured a great deal as an alchemist.

But I’ve still got a long way to go. I need to become a skilled alchemical apothecary, just like Elysis was!

And teaching people was part of my job.

“Did you all write down some skin problems we can tackle today?” I asked.

“Yes!”

Much to my surprise, twelve women showed up for today’s lesson. *Maybe they intend to make a lot of skincare products.* And Eva was among them. *It seems she wants to learn for herself! Good for her!*

“Today, we’ll make face cream. It requires three ingredients: oil, distilled water, and alcohol. You can, however, change the ingredients as your skin requires. Also, we don’t have many kinds of alcohol, so some of you might decide to cut it out altogether. But since this is your first time today, we’ll make something simple.”



We started preparing the distilled water. This time, we used roses. We boiled roses, cooled the mixture so the steam wouldn't escape, and then turned it back into liquid. The result was distilled water with essence of roses. You could use all manner of plants to make distilled water, each with different effects on the skin. One needs to keep those different effects in mind when using skin care products.

And that's why they need to study up on it!

But since today was their first time, I stuck to roses. I had some distilled water with other ingredients prepared for people with other skin issues, so we could change the ingredients at will. I prepared the other distilled water with alchemy.

Distilled rosewater had many effects. It was good for moisturizing the skin and fighting off acne, as well as preventing aging and stiffening of the skin. This made it good for beginners and assuming they weren't allergic to it, it was a good all-around option.

Next up was oil. People with greasy skin don't need much oil in their products; some should even go for oil-free options. But since Fort Deshmel obstructed the sunlight, which often resulted in dry skin, I made oil a part of this lesson. Some of the women's faces were scarred from their time as slaves, so using oil would benefit their healing process too.

This time I used Bajo oil (this world's version of Jojoba oil) and rose oil (this world's version of rosehip oil). Bajo oil was a good all-purpose oil that was said to be effective for all skin types. What made it so good was that its ingredients were similar to human skin, which granted an unparalleled permeation rate of 20 to 30 percent.

It was highly moisturizing, making the skin soft and supple, and it helped remove pimples and boils, making it effective across all age groups. It was also good for people with dermatitis and helped with pregnancy stretch marks and diaper rash. Recent studies have shown it's good for the hairline, giving hope to men with thinning hair.

Rose oil is good for skin regeneration, acne, and preventing aging. It has a very strong smell, and rose aroma is said to have soothing effects. The only issue was that it oxidized easily, so it had to be stored in dark places and its bottles had to be black.

Lastly, the alcohol. The easiest type of alcohol was glycerin. In

my past life, the Japanese would use ice instead, since it was said to be good for the skin. For some people, alcohol has adverse effects on the skin, so they could choose not to use it if it doesn't help them.

This time, I prepared a Rofola ale made using clean Lake Rofola water and the Rofola Lachiko fruit. It was very sweet and had a refreshing aroma that really heated up the throat—or so they say. I didn't try it, of course, since I was too young to drink. But based on the faces of adults who did drink it, I assumed it was like beer.

Nakona and I made our moisturizer using one drop of Rofola ale, three drops of Bajo oil, and distilled rose water.

Rofola's water really suits Nakona and me well. It's where we grew up, after all.

"I've prepared a few more kinds of distilled water and oil if you need them," I said, "so look at the instructions I wrote for you, and feel free to mix and match based on what suits you. If the distilled water doesn't agree with you, we have refined water, too."

"Excuse me, Holy Woman," one of the women said. "Can't we put in more Bajo oil?"

"I think you should start by going with the prescribed amount and, once you've used it, you can write down your impressions and try to adjust it according to your needs. If you make it too potent and it ends up not being a good match for you, it could worsen your skin condition."

"I-I see."

People tend to think: *if Bajo oil is so useful, why not use lots of it?* But for people with sensitive skin, it can make them absorb more substances that are harmful to them. Plus, they could be allergic to the oil, so I hoped everyone would be cautious about how much they used.

"First, let's sterilize the container by pouring boiling water into it. Once you're done sterilizing, pour in the distilled water, Bajo oil, and rose oil, but mind the ratio. Distilled water should make up most of the mixture, followed by a drop or two of Bajo oil and rose oil."

"Is that all we'll be putting in?" one of the women asked.

"We don't know how it'll affect your skin, so think of today's session as finding out which base suits you. We'll be adding and subtracting after this, so if anyone wants to add anything else to the

mix, please ask me first.”

And so, we began making the moisturizer. Everyone mixed the ingredients per my instructions. Making it was simple enough, but the cream can use such a wide range of ingredients, it could quickly become a hobby you get addicted to!

“Wait, so it’s done already?” one of the women asked.

“It’s so easy!” another woman said.

“See? Easy, right?” I said. “Now you have to go into trial and error to figure out which ingredients are good for you, so try what you made today out for a week. If any issues pop up, write them down, and if you tell me, I’ll be sure to bring ingredients that might suit you better for our next session.”

“Ah, you’ll give us another chance to make moisturizer with you?!” the women all looked delighted.

“I don’t mind!” I beamed. “Let’s all look our best together!”

The dining hall filled with voices of joy. I snuck a glance at Eva, who usually looked quite gloomy, and found her curiously eyeing the moisturizer she’d made. With today’s sessions, I succeeded in getting most of the east camp’s women interested in cosmetics, including Eva.

But what about the west side ladies? Are they just gonna roll over and lose? Or will they study on their own and overcome any challenges that arise?

I did tell them to come to me for help if they needed it... But maybe they have a plan of their own?

They still have time. And it’s not just about Konita’s skin. They need to make sure her attire and confidence are in tip-top shape, too.

“Oh! We’ll be making face cream next,” I said abruptly.

“You’ll teach us how to make that, too?!”

Everyone’s attention turned back to me.

“I would be happy to. A good cream is necessary to keep the moisturizer’s properties locked in. You need a good regimen to really get the full benefits of your products.”

“Oh, please, teach us more!”

The east camp ladies really are excited to learn. Good luck, ladies!



A week passed, and still, none of the west camp ladies came to me

for help. I asked the east side ladies about it, and they told me the other women were just doing their jobs as usual, without any visible signs of preparing for the fashion show.

Are they seriously not motivated enough? I thought the prizes were pretty tempting...

"Holy Woman," I heard someone call out to me as I was making my lunch in the second-floor dining hall's kitchens.

"Yes?" I asked. "Oh..."

Three west camp women had appeared, escorted by a lady from the east camp. All three of them had very strained expressions, like they had been cornered. I assumed some trouble must have been happening in the background, but it looked like it was finally time for things to become apparent.

"What's the matter?" I asked.

"We want to...consult you about the fashion show..." one of the women said.

"Okay."

I stopped cooking and took a seat next to the table to hear them out. The women standing there were Steffa, Jefi, and Ann. The woman accompanying them was Maya.

Steffa was the first to speak. "You see, the model you chose for our camp, Konita...she's shut herself off in her room and won't come out."

"Marie badmouthed her, and we let it slide because we didn't want to get involved..." Jefi muttered.

"We *do* want to participate in the fashion show, though," Ann said.

"Did you apologize to Konita?" I asked.

These women had sided with Konita's abusers and helped corner her. It made sense that they didn't want to get involved. Defending Konita would be tantamount to making themselves the next target.

However...

"You know, it's very strange when you think about it," I said in a quiet voice. "You were all Edesa Kura's slaves. I thought you ladies, more than anyone else, would know how painful it is to be abused and tormented."

The three women all went very pale.

"Reaching out for help just to be pushed away hurts, doesn't it?" I looked directly at them as I chose each word carefully. So the

words would reach them. So they'd understand. "I can only imagine how terrible that is. But what about you? What if *someone* took your hand when you reached out for help? What if you took their hand in their time of need? I'm... I was abandoned as a baby. I'm only here because my dad picked me up and adopted me. I'm still... I'll always be grateful. Reaching out to someone...can change their fate. Don't you think?"

I looked at them, concerned, as they exchanged gazes.

"Are you telling us to stand up to Marie?" Steffa asked.

"But..." Jefi murmured.

"You're telling us to pick a fight with her!" Ann exclaimed, waving her hands erratically. "I just want to get along with everyone!"

What I said went completely over her head!

"And you can't get along with Konita?" I asked.

The three of them looked away from me, silently denying my suggestion.

"The Holy Woman's right, Jefi," Maya, who'd accompanied the three women, said in a firm tone.

"M-Maya..." Jefi turned to look at her.

The trio all jolted at Maya's accusing glare.

"You should all apologize," she continued. "You really think you didn't do anything wrong? That you get a pass simply because you didn't bully her directly? Do you really, *honestly* believe that? Can you really ignore Konita when she's in so much pain? Doing that is completely supporting her abuser."

Maya was one of the people who, like Konita, had tried to actively befriend Eva. When we made the moisturizers, she stood in the front row, jotting down notes. And she didn't do it out of concern for her skin. She did it for Eva.

The whole situation just felt so off to me. They had all been abused at the hands of an evil country. They all *knew* how terrible abuse could be. So why did they all react so differently to Konita's bullying? Was this really just a matter of individual nature? Either way, some people could hurt someone without remorse, while other people treated that same person with kindness. Was this merely human nature? Or did the Dwarf inside the Bottle have a subtle influence on those susceptible to it? I hoped that if I were ever in a similar situation, that I would act the same way Maya had and stand up for what was right!

“B-But what are we supposed to do?” Ann asked.

“The Holy Woman already said!” Maya replied. “Just *apologize* to her! Tell her you’re sorry you ignored her all this time!”

“Now? After all this time...?”

“Yes, now, after all this time! You need to go to Konita and ask her to help you win the fashion show! That’s your only option, because you wronged her until now. You’re lucky you at least have a chance to apologize. You think she’ll forgive Marie and her cronies if they apologize? I don’t. So just tell her you’re sorry, please. I’ll come with you.”

Maya, are you an angel or something?! How can you be so kind...?!

“Y-You will?” Ann asked.

“You’ll really forgive us and help us out?” Jefe stared at her in disbelief.

“We *really* want to get closer to the knights manning the walls...!” Steffa said.

“Then take that enthusiasm and direct it toward telling Konita how you feel. I’m sure she’ll understand!”

I agreed with her at first, but I suddenly stopped.

Are you sure they should tell her that to her face? Should you really be giving them advice in good faith, Maya? Honesty’s a good thing, of course. But maybe stop and consider Konita’s feelings here. I don’t have to step in and stop this, do I?

But they all got to their feet, pumping their fists in determination... It didn’t look like they’d listen to me.

I have to stop them! They might just needlessly hurt Konita again!

“Listen! You probably shouldn’t tell her you’re only doing this because you want to hook up with knights!” I interjected.

“No!” Maya said loudly. “Considering what she’s been put through, it’s probably for the best if we don’t hide anything from her anymore and just come clean! She might not believe them if they just come over and apologize out of nowhere. I think she’ll feel relieved to know the truth!”

Maya seemed to understand where I was coming from, but she still insisted on them revealing their motives and apologizing.

B-But that’s—

“It’s decided, then. Let’s go!” Maya said.

“Y-Yes!” Jefe agreed.

“Let’s go!” Steffa nodded.

"Thank you for your time, Holy Woman!" Ann bowed her head to me.

"Ah...um... You're welcome, I guess...?"

The four of them enthusiastically left the dining hall.

What do I do? Should I have told them off more firmly? But I guess they're going to apologize, so it's not all bad...?

...Maybe I should try to talk to Konita myself?

If things looked like they'd get more complicated, I'd have to step in and intervene.

...I really hope I didn't just make this mess all the more complicated with my meddling...



A week later...

Only a week remained until the fashion show. Someone called out to me as I went outside to check the medicinal herb field.

"Holy Woman!"

"What is it?" I turned around, and then my eyes widened in surprise. "Huh?! Eva?! Is that you?!"

It was Eva, dressed in an olive-oil-colored dress.

Is that really her?! She's so pretty!

Her stiff, greasy hair, her dark clothes, and the way she'd always hung her head hid so much beauty! Her hair regained its luster, because its dark colors gave way to fair brown, silky smooth hair. It shined in the sunlight like an angel's halo and cascaded beautifully down her back, reaching all the way past her hips.

She was tall from the start, but when she walked with proper posture, it really brought out her figure. She also cut her bangs, which made her pretty face much easier to see. The moisturizer and face cream must've been tweaked especially well to suit her skin, because it looked glossy and supple.

Between her clothes, the color of her cheeks, and the brightness of her smile, she looked like a completely different person!

"Heheh, yes! It's me, Eva."

"Wow!" I exclaimed. "Is it really you? I didn't recognize you at first!"

"Me neither!" She smiled bashfully. "I didn't think the way I'd

feel would change this much.”

That sheepish smile of hers was truly lovely. *I didn't think she'd go through such a transformation in just over two weeks!*

“The east camp ladies were really passionate about convincing me to win this time. I want to win the contest and save Konita from the west camp ladies!”

“Save her?” I tilted my head.

“Yes! I came to you for help at first, but I think I should be the one to save her! We might only be united by this fashion show, but so long as we are, I want to show Konita what I've become. I want to prove to her that everything she told me was true!”

“Eva...” I whispered.

That's right. This all started with Eva coming to me for help with Konita. Eva neglected self-care because of her trauma, and Konita was the one who encouraged and always looked after her.

Everything I've heard about Konita might've been slightly idolized by Eva's admiring, biased point of view. But even so, Konita means that much to her!

The east camp ladies were really passionate about helping Eva, even if it was just so they could win the fashion show, and had helped her regain her confidence.

Their passion was real. And that was why Eva had changed so much. I was honestly impressed and a little taken aback. *People can change so much in so little time! Eva has become so confident she can say that she'll save Konita on her own.*

“Yes... Yes!” I nodded. “You're right! I'm sure everyone will agree! Konita was right about you all along!”

“Yes, she was!” Eva nodded.

“For sure!”

Konita knew Eva's true beauty better than anyone else, so I was sure that seeing Eva as she was right now would convince her that she'd always been right.

The fashion show was a week away. I hoped the two of them would compete fair and square and go back to being good friends! And that through that, the women of Fort Deshmel would come to be better versions of themselves while picking up some new skills in our classes and meet wonderful people in the process!

No, it doesn't matter how it happens, so long as they can find their own form of happiness! I hope that for every moment of misery they felt as slaves, they get double the joy! Good luck, ladies of the west camp!



THE fashion show was held in a plaza inside Fort Deshmel. There wasn't a cloud in the sky and we had a large audience. I looked down on the show from the event organizer stand, built by the castle and near the plaza.

At the back of the stage was the judges' table, where the knights chosen to decide this fashion show's winner were seated. Past them was the audience, who were watching standing up since we hadn't set up any chairs. There were still some soldiers on the ramparts, but they had good eyesight, so they could likely see the show just fine.

I know I came up with the idea of this fashion show, but I didn't expect them to build a stage and an event organizer stand just for me!

I knew Jiril and Mirage were enthusiastic about this. But apparently, they'd even gotten the men involved to build everything for the show.

...Curvy women are scary...

But thanks to them, I was able to make sure everything went smoothly up in my private sitting area. I even had guards, Renge and Revi, who leaned against the railing and watched over the proceedings below.

"A fashion show, eh?" Renge said. "So you'll be judging who wins not based on who's prettier, but on which camp put in the most effort to help their contestant look her prettiest?"

"Right," I told him. "Our models this time are Eva from the east camp and Konita from the west camp."

"It's really hard to tell human women apart these days," he said, admitting to something astonishing. "They have so little mana that I can barely recognize them."

"Are you serious...?" I asked.

The two Mythicals watched the fashion show with utter disinterest. According to Renge, Mythicals tell human women apart by their mana, and since I, Lico, and Nakona all knew the mana recovery technique, we had high mana reserves that made us easily recognizable...or something like that.

Thank goodness. Imagine Renge not being able to tell me apart until now!

"It's really important for us," Revi explained. "If the difference between our mana reserves is too great, we can't recognize our

mates.”

“R-Really?” I asked uncomfortably.

“And if there’s too much of a gap, we can’t produce children either,” he added.

“R-Really...!” I exclaimed, now feeling awkward.

Revi’s giving me insight into Mythical Beast biology! Does this mean...I can be Renge’s “mate?” I should have enough mana, right? W-Wait, what am I thinking...?!



“Tina?” Renge stared at me. “Are you all right? You look red. Do you have a fever?”

“N-No! No fever!” I blurted out. “It’s just, the sun, you know?! It’s hot! *Heheh!* But I’m fine!”

“R-Really?” he said dubiously. “Don’t push yourself.”

“I-I won’t!”

Now’s not the time for weird thoughts! I need to watch the fashion show!

First, we had both models come out in their usual outfits. Then they would wear three different outfits their respective camps had prepared for them. A panel of five knights would decide and pick which model’s potential was brought out the most.

And the knights would meet not just the models, but the women who’d coordinated their outfits. Some of the knights were still manning the walls, watching the show from above. Renge had taken care of the fort’s security, putting up a unique, wide-range barrier just for today. After all, we needed to make sure the knights on the walls met our ladies, too!

“So...those are our first models?” Renge asked.

“Yes, Eva from the east camp and Konita from the west camp,” I said. “Both of them look much more cheerful now!”

I got the chance to talk to Konita that morning. She’d shut herself off in her room for a long time. But with Maya and the others persuading her, bit by bit, she’d decided to go outside. Mirage and Jiril had talked to her to check if she still wanted to participate in the fashion show and she told them she did.

When I talked to her, she’d said, with a tired expression, that it was because Steffa, Jefa, and Ann were honest with her. I didn’t ask about Marie and her group, who were abusing her. When Konita got up on the stage, she had a dazzling smile. But, even from here, I could see some signs of fatigue on her features.

After appearing in their regular clothes, they got on stage again, this time in a one-piece maid outfit designed by their respective camps. Eva wore a classic dress that hit just above her ankles and showed off her natural height. *The simple but traditional approach.* But that didn’t mean it was easy to wear, and the fact she looked so good in it was admirable!

Her long hair was tied in a long braid, and when she spun in place, she really looked like the kind of maid you would see in a

nobleman's home. *Not that I've ever actually seen maids before...*

By contrast, Konita wore an outfit that accentuated her breasts and curves. She had a waist apron decorated with flowing, adorable laces, and her skirt was knee-length. She looked cute and cool, like a waitress in a café!

I was taken aback at the sight of their outfits and posing. *I didn't expect them to look this good!*

"I can't tell their outfits apart," Renge frowned.

"Hmmm... It's probably the hems? Their hems look a bit different, don't they?" Revi said, trying to come up with something.

"Huh, I guess so?" Renge didn't sound convinced.

Those two are no good, I thought to myself as I stared at them in cold silence. *They just can't tell anything about them apart.*

But that was fine. The fashion show was about impressing the judges, not them!

The crowd cheered and was in high spirits, so everything was going smoothly. I felt relieved.

"I wish I could be a model, too!" one woman said.

"They'll be holding another fashion show next month. Why don't you ask the Holy Woman?" a friend of hers said.

"Speaking of, where is the Holy Woman?"

I quickly ducked under the wooden railing surrounding my private viewing box.

I don't need any attention here! Focus on the models! I don't need to butt in and have people fuss about me!

"Why are you hiding, Holy Woman?" Revi asked me.

"Looks like they're coming out with their next outfit," Renge said. "Don't you want to see them, Tina?"

"I-I do!" I squeaked, peeking up from the wall.

Next, they changed their hairstyles and came out wearing makeup and one-piece dresses.

Cute! I bet the men would get excited if their date showed up looking like this!

Eva continued to capitalize on her natural height and wore a khaki-colored ankle-length dress that accentuated her long legs and was tight under the chest. She also wore sandals, with their soles being the same khaki color as her dress.

Her hair was tied in a ponytail. But since it was braided earlier, it had a nice wave to it that gave it a loose, fluffy appearance. As per Mirage's suggestion, she also had a hair clip

shaped like an orange flower.

By contrast, Konita had a knee-length three-tiered skirt. I was impressed. By this world's antiquated beauty standards, a woman baring her legs was seen as promiscuous. So this was a very avant-garde design.

Of course, Nakona's outfit showed off her legs. But in her case, it didn't count because it was a combat outfit, and she wore thigh-highs. The outfit suited her and didn't look the slightest bit inappropriate. If anything, for how cute she was, her outfit wasn't the slightest bit sexy... *Not that I'm one to talk...*

This isn't about me, though!

Konita had her light-brown hair tied up in a bun and wore a buttoned blouse with suspenders that held up her skirt. She also had thigh-highs, just like Nakona, and the bit of exposed skin between her skirt and socks alluringly drew the men's eyes.

Personally, I preferred the maid outfits and I thought Eva had the edge there. But this round was built around the idea of going out on a date, and I felt like Konita took the cake this time. The outfit fit her better and was more aggressive!

"I still can't tell what's different," Renge said.

"The hems, right?" Revi suggested.

"That's the same as before, Revi."

"Ugh..."

"If you don't get it, you don't have to comment," I chided the two of them.

They just aren't suited to watch something like this.

"How long is this going to last?" Renge asked me.

"Th-The next one's the last one! It's a contest to see which of the camps brought out their model's beauty with the clothes they designed. The judges will make their decisions after seeing all three outfits."

"Hmmm," the two Mythicals said at once, clearly disinterested.

Ughhh! Sheesh!

The last round finally began. I could see the knights serving as judges from where I was, and I could see their expressions clearly. They looked excited to see the last outfits. But their expressions were torn with the pressure of having to pick a winner. *Watching is fun, but having to actually judge is probably really hard...*

"Wow! Look at that!" one of them said suddenly.

"Ooh! Now that brings back memories..." another knight said.

“It’s Dou-Lu’s bridal attire. I thought it was long gone...”

Dou-Lu? I’ve never heard of that place...

“Renge, what’s Dou-Lu?” I asked.

“Dou-Lu? I haven’t heard that name in a long while... It was a country on the southeast side of the human continent, near Edesa Kura. Edesa Kura annexed it and wiped it out in a war about twenty years ago.”

“Huh?! You mean—”

That war happened before I was born, then. I’d been born and Dad had lost his arm during the closing stages of that war. The one where Edesa Kura had destroyed all nations around it, small and large.

Back when Dad’s father—my late Grandpa—was still alive, Edesa Kura constantly invaded other countries, denying countless people both their homes and human dignity.

And now, Eva and Konita were standing on the stage wearing the same outfit in differing colors. Their hair was done up with ribbons made of colorful threads. They both wore identical chokers and white empire-lined dresses that showed off their shoulders and ended in colorful, decorative hems. They also had necklaces made of brilliant, fresh flowers hanging from their necks.

One of the judges got to his feet, shouted “Dou-Lu!” and hurried over to the stage.

“You...you both are also from....?!” he asked, his voice shaking.

He’s probably confirming that they’re from there, too...

Eva and Konita exchanged confused glances, then approached the knight standing under the stage, their shoulders shaking.

The three of them held hands. It looked, for a moment, like they were crying. But the two models soon returned to the stage and swung up their joined hands. The knight also returned to his place and clapped hard, applauding them. The audience and the other knights soon joined. Eva and Konita both had tears running down their cheeks.

“What is this? Some weird human ritual?” Renge asked.

“It’s nostalgia!” I said.

“O-Oh...” Renge and Revi exchanged looks.

You Mythicals just don’t get it!

But I could relate to what the people here were feeling. I had died in my old world and was reincarnated into this one. Just like

them, I couldn't go back home. And though I was often too busy to actively think about it, I'd sometimes look up at the sky and wonder how my mom was doing.

Right now, I was shouldering the grave responsibility of doing something about that big mass in the sky: the Sugula. *But if I could at least let my mother know that I'm fine...* I often thought. *Mom's all alone now. How is she? What happened after I died?*

My memories of that world weren't the most positive. But I did want Mom to be healthy and happy... I had no way to check on her. But since I'd managed to find happiness in this life, I wanted her to live on happily, too.

I brought my hands together, praying for my mother's wellbeing, knowing all the while that prayer would likely never reach her.

"Tina?" Renge asked me, noticing my emotional state.

"...I-It's nothing, Renge!" I said hurriedly. "Is the judging about to end?"

"Ah, yes. It looks like it."

I turned my eyes to the stage again, where the judges had put down their ballots and placed them in a box. Whichever model's faction got the most votes would be the winner. The women who'd designed their outfits would also go on stage and introduce themselves. And since the knights manning the walls would be watching, it would be a perfect chance for them to appeal to them.

After all, women who knew how to sew were quite sought after in some countries. Knights in particular tended to have their clothes get ripped, by the nature of their job.

In De Marl, women who were both pretty and strong-spirited were sought after. This was why those three knights were interested in Nakona so much.

Mirage and Jiril went up on stage.

"Everyone's done voting, *hm!*" Jiril said.

"We will now coooooount the ballots!" Mirage declared.

The two of them had been behind the scenes so far, but in the end, we couldn't keep those attention hogs out of sight the whole time. They appeared at the most exciting moment. They brought the ballot box to the middle of the stage and began counting the five votes. I watched on, excited to see which side would win.

"First vote goes to the east camp, for its second outfit!"

One knight voted for Eva's date outfit, giving the east camp

the initial advantage. I could understand why they chose her. Konita's outfit may have seemed a bit too aggressive and on the nose, though I liked it.

"Next vote goes to the west camp's first outfit!"

The second vote went to Konita's maid uniform. The uniform stressed her glamorous chest, which was probably a bit...*too* alluring for the men. I could understand. Even I, as a woman, thought it was cute with all its lace layers!

"Next vote goes to the east camp's first outfit!"

The third vote went to Eva's maid uniform. It *did* have that traditional charm! And since the knights hoped to someday grow influential and wealthy enough to live in a big estate, the idea of a beautiful maid appealed to their senses.

So far it was 2-1 in the east camp's favor. *A close competition!*

"Next vote goes to the east camp's third outfit!"

Ooh! The east camp has three votes! That means they won!

"Last vote goes to the west's third outfit, bringing the total of 3-2 in the east camp's favor!" Jiril said. "And thus, the east camp is decided as the victor, *hm!*"

"Congratulaaaaaations! Would the outfits' designers pleaaaaaaase step up to the staaaaaaage?" Mirage beckoned the east camp designers up.

I sighed in relief as I saw the knights on the walls lean forward to get a better look at them. Getting the knights interested in Deshmel's women was our secondary goal for the fashion show, after all. *And it seems to have worked...!*

This should improve things for them!

"Oh?" I stared at the stage, where more was happening.

Eva and Konita were talking about something. They both held hands, leaned their foreheads against one another, and wept. But they wore happy smiles.

"...Thank goodness," I whispered to myself.

Eva managed to win Konita's heart back. After all, in winning, she'd proved everything Konita said about her was true. But Eva didn't do this all on her own. The east camp ladies were all hard, diligent workers, graced with kindness and talent.

Eva knew this, of course. But Konita was the first to see and realize her potential. Now they embraced, smiling, proving that this event was a huge success.

"I'm not really sure what happened here, but you look happy,

Tina. So that makes it worthwhile,” Renge remarked with a smile.

“Yeah! Thanks, Renge!”



A few days later, as I was tending the fields, Steffa, Jefi, and Ann hurried over to me, their expressions filled with excitement.

“Hello, Holy Woman!” they greeted me.

“Yes, hello,” I greeted them back, dusting off my hands as I straightened to speak with them.

“Holy Woman, have you decided when we’ll hold the next fashion show?!” Steffa asked me.

“Not yet... Did you spot any girls who’ve been looking depressed lately?”

“Yes! Marie and her group!” she said with a big grin.

I could only laugh dryly. Marie’s group were the ones who’d bullied Konita. Apparently, they’d lost their status with the other women because Steffa, Jefi, and Ann had apologized to Konita and changed the west camp’s outlook. I had misgivings about the way those three had wanted to apologize, but Konita had told me she’d found their blatant honesty about their motives to be refreshing and that’s why she had agreed to go on with the fashion show.

After witnessing their exchange, the rest of the west camp’s women also apologized to Konita for looking the other way. That triggered a choice to unify the west camp in the name of their goal, leaving Marie and her group of bullies without a place among their ranks. Marie was now the one left out, and her group had gradually started falling apart.

“It was so nasty, we don’t dare tell you the details, Holy Woman!” Ann said.

“W-Wow...” I murmured, a little daunted.

“But listen to this! Konita’s *dating* one of the judges now!”

“What?!” I exclaimed. “That’s amazing!”

I had hoped it would happen, but the women really are hooking up with the knights now! That’s great! Konita really turned the tables and came out on top!

“Of course, that only twists the knife deeper for Marie!” Jefi boasted.

“I-I can imagine...” I said.

I can imagine how bad seeing that must feel, but she honestly had this coming.

“This time she’s the one shutting herself off in her room~!” Ann announced with a smirk.

“So, if you have another fashion show planned, you should make Marie the model next!” Steffa suggested.

“We were really moved when we saw how beautiful we made Konita look! So we wanna do that to Marie too, even though she totally deserves to be jealous!”

The glee in their voice was a bit discouraging. Yet, those three gave a person who lost their smile a chance to start over. Now, they wanted to do it again. True, Marie had hurt Konita. But even if she did something wrong, people can change. *It’s never too late to reflect on your wrongdoings and start over.* I believed everyone had the right to a second chance.

“Okay, I’ll consider it,” I said. “A lot of people complained you didn’t have enough time to prepare this time, so I’ve been considering changing some things up next time.”

“Oh! More time would be nice!” Ann said.

“We definitely didn’t have enough time to completely rework Konita’s look!” Jefa nodded.

“Two or three months of preparation time would be best!” Steffa added. “It took us two weeks just to convince Konita!”

That’s awfully specific!

Still, the fact they got her to get over her emotional misgivings in just two weeks is impressive enough!

“Right, then let’s work out a new plan together!” I said.

“Yes, let’s!” the trio said.

Now I had something else to do between purifying monsters, experimenting with alchemy and cooking, and tending the fields!

♣Afterword

HELLO, everyone. My name is Kiri Komori. It's a pleasure to meet you all here again. Thank you very much for picking up volume 4 of *Reincarnated as the Last of my Kind*!

I want to take this opportunity to thank everyone who read and supported this book. To the editors who reached out to me. To Yamigo for their beautiful illustrations. To Roman Lempert, who handled the translation. To everyone involved with the production of the ebook version. And to my family, who always supported me.

Thank you all so, so much!

This time I added a new side story for the “Me at Age Fifteen” chapter. I wanted to write about it sooner but thought I'd only be able to add it toward the end of the series. Thankfully, my editor gave me permission to write it for this volume. So I wrote down a bit about the day-to-day life in Fort Deshmel, which I never got to expand on in the web novel.

I think living an ordinary, routine life must be hard in a situation where the end of the world is in sight and the people living in Fort Deshmel are exposed to the most danger. But by having Tinaris with them, they're able to live in what is, ostensibly, a safe zone.

Being able to lead a normal life in such a situation must be true happiness. And while the theme is somewhat hackneyed and might feel a bit heavy-handed, I hope you can enjoy the chapter and read it in a carefree manner.

Also, this might be old news by now, but at the time of this afterword's writing, the series has been released in print! There's both a hardcover and paperback version up for sale. The hardcover version isn't available in Japan. So, if you get to see it, do make sure to enjoy it... I'm honestly jealous. I wish I could see it on bookstore shelves too!

Also, volumes 1-3 are available in audiobook format too, with Cassandra Morris and Graham Halstead as the narrators! I hope you support the series in audiobook format, too.

Thank you for your continued support!

—Kiri Komori.



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COOK WITH MY FLUFFY FRIENDS**

STORY BY: YU SAKURAI
ILLUSTRATION BY: KASUMI NAGI
SERIES | OUT NOW

After being dumped by her fiancé and expelled from the kingdom, Laetitia decides to live her life in leisure, cooking for cute and fluffy mythical creatures!



I'D RATHER HAVE A CAT THAN A HAREM! VOLUME 1

STORY BY: KOSUZU KOBATO
ILLUSTRATION BY: HINANO CHANO
SERIES | VOL 1 OUT NOW

Cats are better than harems! Amy has reincarnated into an otome game world as a villainess, but she's more interested in cats than boys!